

Harry Potter



J. K. ROWLING

HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS



BY
J.K. ROWLING

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FOR SEÁN P. F. HARRIS,

GETAWAY DRIVER AND FOUL-WEATHER FRIEND

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CHAPTER ONE



THE WORST BIRTHDAY

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. Mr. Vernon Dursley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

"Third time this week!" he roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!"

Harry tried, yet again, to explain.

"She's *bored*," he said. "She's used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night —"

"Do I look stupid?" snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy mustache. "I know what'll happen if that owl's let out."

He exchanged dark looks with his wife, Petunia.

Harry tried to argue back but his words were drowned by a long, loud belch from the Dursleys' son, Dudley.

"I want more bacon."

"There's more in the frying pan, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. "We must build you up while we've got the chance. . . . I don't like the sound of that school food. . . ."

"Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when *I* was at Smeltings," said Uncle Vernon heartily. "Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?"

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry.

"Pass the frying pan."

"You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

"I meant 'please'!" said Harry quickly. "I didn't mean —"

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "ABOUT SAYING THE 'M' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?"

"But I —"

"HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

"I just —"

“I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!”

Harry stared from his purple-faced uncle to his pale aunt, who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

“All right,” said Harry, “*all right* . . .”

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Harry closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Harry had come home for the summer holidays, Uncle Vernon had been treating him like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Harry Potter *wasn't* a normal boy. As a matter of fact, he was as not normal as it is possible to be.

Harry Potter was a wizard — a wizard fresh from his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And if the Dursleys were unhappy to have him back for the holidays, it was nothing to how Harry felt.

He missed Hogwarts so much it was like having a constant stomachache. He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his classes (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), the mail arriving by owl, eating banquets in the Great Hall, sleeping in his four-poster bed in the tower dormitory, visiting the gamekeeper, Hagrid, in his cabin next to the Forbidden Forest in the grounds, and, especially, Quidditch, the most popular sport in the Wizarding world (six tall goalposts, four flying balls, and fourteen players on broomsticks).

All Harry's spellbooks, his wand, robes, cauldron, and top-of-the-line Nimbus Two Thousand broomstick had been locked in a

cupboard under the stairs by Uncle Vernon the instant Harry had come home. What did the Dursleys care if Harry lost his place on the House Quidditch team because he hadn't practiced all summer? What was it to the Dursleys if Harry went back to school without any of his homework done? The Dursleys were what wizards called Muggles (not a drop of magical blood in their veins), and as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in the family was a matter of deepest shame. Uncle Vernon had even padlocked Harry's owl, Hedwig, inside her cage, to stop her from carrying messages to anyone in the Wizarding world.

Harry looked nothing like the rest of the family. Uncle Vernon was large and neckless, with an enormous black mustache; Aunt Petunia was horse-faced and bony; Dudley was blond, pink, and porky. Harry, on the other hand, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes and jet-black hair that was always untidy. He wore round glasses, and on his forehead was a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

It was this scar that made Harry so particularly unusual, even for a wizard. This scar was the only hint of Harry's very mysterious past, of the reason he had been left on the Dursleys' doorstep eleven years before.

At the age of one year old, Harry had somehow survived a curse from the greatest Dark sorcerer of all time, Lord Voldemort, whose name most witches and wizards still feared to speak. Harry's parents had died in Voldemort's attack, but Harry had escaped with his lightning scar, and somehow — nobody understood why — Voldemort's powers had been destroyed the instant he had failed to kill Harry.

So Harry had been brought up by his dead mother's sister and her husband. He had spent ten years with the Dursleys, never understanding why he kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing the Dursleys' story that he had got his scar in the car crash that had killed his parents.

And then, exactly a year ago, Hogwarts had written to Harry, and the whole story had come out. Harry had taken up his place at wizard school, where he and his scar were famous . . . but now the school year was over, and he was back with the Dursleys for the summer, back to being treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly.

The Dursleys hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Harry's twelfth birthday. Of course, his hopes hadn't been high; they'd never given him a real present, let alone a cake — but to ignore it completely . . .

At that moment, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, "Now, as we all know, today is a very important day."

Harry looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

"This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career," said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to his toast. *Of course*, he thought bitterly, *Uncle Vernon was talking about the stupid dinner party*. He'd been talking of nothing else for two weeks. Some rich builder and his wife were coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a huge order from him (Uncle Vernon's company made drills).

"I think we should run through the schedule one more time," said Uncle Vernon. "We should all be in position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be — ?"

“In the lounge,” said Aunt Petunia promptly, “waiting to welcome them graciously to our home.”

“Good, good. And Dudley?”

“I’ll be waiting to open the door.” Dudley put on a foul, simpering smile. “May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?”

“They’ll *love* him!” cried Aunt Petunia rapturously.

“Excellent, Dudley,” said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry. “And *you*?”

“I’ll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I’m not there,” said Harry tonelessly.

“Exactly,” said Uncle Vernon nastily. “I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour them drinks. At eight-fifteen —”

“I’ll announce dinner,” said Aunt Petunia.

“And, Dudley, you’ll say —”

“May I take you through to the dining room, Mrs. Mason?” said Dudley, offering his fat arm to an invisible woman.

“My perfect little gentleman!” sniffed Aunt Petunia.

“And *you*?” said Uncle Vernon viciously to Harry.

“I’ll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I’m not there,” said Harry dully.

“Precisely. Now, we should aim to get in a few good compliments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?”

“Vernon tells me you’re a *wonderful* golfer, Mr. Mason. . . . *Do* tell me where you bought your dress, Mrs. Mason. . . .”

“Perfect . . . Dudley?”

“How about — ‘We had to write an essay about our hero at school, Mr. Mason, and *I* wrote about *you*.’”

This was too much for both Aunt Petunia and Harry. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and hugged her son, while Harry ducked under the table so they wouldn’t see him laughing.

“And you, boy?”

Harry fought to keep his face straight as he emerged.

“I’ll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I’m not there,” he said.

“Too right, you will,” said Uncle Vernon forcefully. “The Masons don’t know anything about you and it’s going to stay that way. When dinner’s over, you take Mrs. Mason back to the lounge for coffee, Petunia, and I’ll bring the subject around to drills. With any luck, I’ll have the deal signed and sealed before the news at ten. We’ll be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca this time tomorrow.”

Harry couldn’t feel too excited about this. He didn’t think the Dursleys would like him any better in Majorca than they did on Privet Drive.

“Right — I’m off into town to pick up the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. And *you*,” he snarled at Harry. “You stay out of your aunt’s way while she’s cleaning.”

Harry left through the back door. It was a brilliant, sunny day. He crossed the lawn, slumped down on the garden bench, and sang under his breath:

“Happy birthday to me . . . happy birthday to me . . .”

No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist. He gazed miserably into the hedge. He had

never felt so lonely. More than anything else at Hogwarts, more even than playing Quidditch, Harry missed his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They, however, didn't seem to be missing him at all. Neither of them had written to him all summer, even though Ron had said he was going to ask Harry to come and stay.

Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside of school. Harry hadn't told the Dursleys this; he knew it was only their terror that he might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking *him* in the cupboard under the stairs with his wand and broomstick. For the first couple of weeks back, Harry had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under his breath and watching Dudley tearing out of the room as fast as his fat legs would carry him. But the long silence from Ron and Hermione had made Harry feel so cut off from the magical world that even taunting Dudley had lost its appeal — and now Ron and Hermione had forgotten his birthday.

What wouldn't he give now for a message from Hogwarts? From any witch or wizard? He'd almost be glad of a sight of his archenemy, Draco Malfoy, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream. . . .

Not that his whole year at Hogwarts had been fun. At the very end of last term, Harry had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort might be a ruin of his former self, but he was still terrifying, still cunning, still determined to regain power. Harry had slipped through Voldemort's clutches for a second time,

but it had been a narrow escape, and even now, weeks later, Harry kept waking in the night, drenched in cold sweat, wondering where Voldemort was now, remembering his livid face, his wide, mad eyes

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright on the garden bench. He had been staring absent-mindedly into the hedge — *and the hedge was staring back*. Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the leaves.

Harry jumped to his feet just as a jeering voice floated across the lawn.

“I know what day it is,” sang Dudley, waddling toward him.

The huge eyes blinked and vanished.

“What?” said Harry, not taking his eyes off the spot where they had been.

“I know what day it is,” Dudley repeated, coming right up to him.

“Well done,” said Harry. “So you’ve finally learned the days of the week.”

“Today’s your *birthday*,” sneered Dudley. “How come you haven’t got any cards? Haven’t you even got friends at that freak place?”

“Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school,” said Harry coolly.

Dudley hitched up his trousers, which were slipping down his fat bottom.

“Why’re you staring at the hedge?” he said suspiciously.

“I’m trying to decide what would be the best spell to set it on fire,” said Harry.

Dudley stumbled backward at once, a look of panic on his fat face.

“You c-can’t — Dad told you you’re not to do m-magic — he said he’ll chuck you out of the house — and you haven’t got anywhere else to go — you haven’t got any *friends* to take you —”

“*Jiggery pokery!*” said Harry in a fierce voice. “*Hocus pocus — squiggly wiggly —*”

“MUUUUUM!” howled Dudley, tripping over his feet as he dashed back toward the house. “MUUUUM! He’s doing you know what!”

Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun. As neither Dudley nor the hedge was in any way hurt, Aunt Petunia knew he hadn’t really done magic, but he still had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan. Then she gave him work to do, with the promise he wouldn’t eat again until he’d finished.

While Dudley lolled around watching and eating ice cream, Harry cleaned the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flower beds, pruned and watered the roses, and repainted the garden bench. The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck. Harry knew he shouldn’t have risen to Dudley’s bait, but Dudley had said the very thing Harry had been thinking himself . . . maybe he *didn’t* have any friends at Hogwarts. . . .

Wish they could see famous Harry Potter now, he thought savagely as he spread manure on the flower beds, his back aching, sweat running down his face.

It was half past seven in the evening when at last, exhausted, he heard Aunt Petunia calling him.

“Get in here! And walk on the newspaper!”

Harry moved gladly into the shade of the gleaming kitchen. On top

of the fridge stood tonight's pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream and sugared violets. A loin of roast pork was sizzling in the oven.

"Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!" snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate. "Upstairs! Hurry!"

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow ties and dinner jackets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the doorbell rang and Uncle Vernon's furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Remember, boy — one sound —"

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe, slipped inside, closed the door, and turned to collapse on his bed.

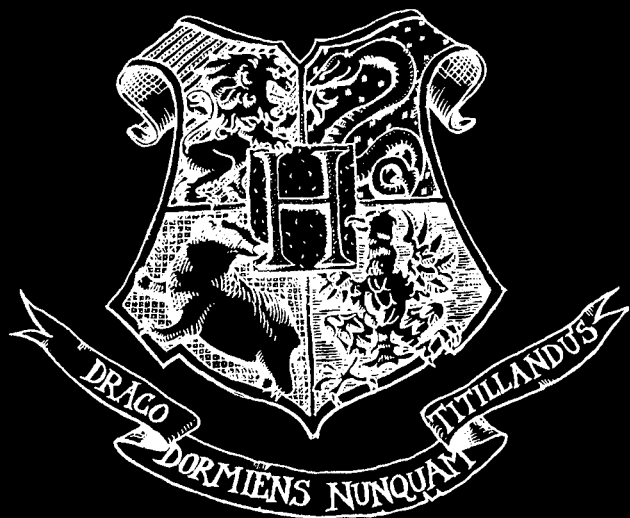
The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.

Ook beskikbaar

Harry Potter en die Towenaar se Steen

HARRY POTTER

en die Kamer van Geheimenisse



J.K. Rowling
Vertaal deur Janie Oosthuysen

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*vir Séan P.E. Harris,
wegkombestuurder en betroubare vriend*

Die Slegste Verjaardag Ooit

Vir die soveelste keer bars 'n argument los om die ontbyttafel by Ligusterlaan 4. Mnr. Vernon Dursley is in die vroeë oggendure wakker gemaak deur 'n harde gehoe-hoe uit sy nefie, Harry, se kamer.

"Die derde keer hierdie week!" brul hy oor die tafel. "As jy daardie uil nie kan beheer nie, sal ek 'n plan daarmee moet maak!"

Harry probeer nogmaals verduidelik.

"Sy's verveeld," sê hy. "Sy's gewoonnd daaraan om snags buite rond te vlieg. As ek haar net in die nag kan loslaat . . ."

"Jy moet dink dat ek onnosel is!" snou oom Vernon hom toe. 'n Stukkie gebakte eier swaai aan sy ruie snor. "Ek weet wat sal gebeur sodra daardie uil losgelaat is."

Hy gooi 'n misnoegde blik na sy vrou, tant Petunia.

Harry wil nog terugpraat, maar dit wat hy wil sê sou onhoorbaar wees, want Dudley, die Dursleys se seun, breek 'n harde wind.

"Ek wil nog spek hê."

"Daar is nog in die braaipan, liefie," sê tant Petunia en kyk met oë vol liefde na haar lummel van 'n seun. "Ons moet jou 'n bietjie vet voer terwyl ons die kans het . . . die kos in daardie skool klink glad nie goed nie . . ."

"Twak, Petunia, ek het nooit honger gely toe *ek* in Smeltings was nie," sê oom Vernon hartlik. "Dudley kry genoeg, nie waar nie, Dudley?"

Dudley, wat so groot is dat sy agterstewe aan weerskante oor die kombuisstoel hang, grynslag en draai na Harry.

"Gee die braaipan aan."

"Jy het die towerwoord vergeet," sê Harry vererg.

Hierdie eenvoudige sin het 'n verstommende uitwerking op die res van die gesin: Dudley snak na asem en val van sy stoel af met 'n slag wat die hele kombuis laat skud; mevrou Dursley los 'n gilletjie en klap haar hande oor haar mond; meneer Dursley spring orent, die are polsend teen sy slape.

"Ek het 'asseblief' bedoel!" sê Harry vinnig. "Ek het nie bedoel dat —"

"WAT HET EK GESÊ," bulder sy oom sodat die spoeg oor die tafel spat, "OOR DAARDIE T-WOORD IN HIERDIE HUIS?"

“Maar ek –”

“HOE DURF JY VIR DUDLEY DREIG!” brul oom Vernon en slaan met sy vuus op die tafel.

“Ek het net –”

“EK WAARSKU JOU! EK SAL NIE TOELAAT DAT DAAR ONDER HIERDIE DAK OOR JOU ABNORMALITEIT GEPRAAT WORD NIE!” Harry staar van sy oom se pers gesig na sy spierwitbleek tante wat sukkel om Dudley op sy voete te help.

“Goed,” sê Harry, “goed . . .”

Oom Vernon sit terug; hy blaas soos ’n renoster en gluur deur twee skerp, klein ogies na Harry.

Sedert Harry terug is vir die somervakansie, gaan oom Vernon aan asof hy ’n bom is wat enige oomblik kan ontplof, want Harry is nie ’n gewone seun nie. Om die waarheid te sê, hy is so abnormaal as wat ’n mens maar kan wees.

Harry Potter is ’n towenaar – ’n towenaar wat so pas sy eerste jaar aan die Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery voltooi het. En as dit vir die Dursleys ’n straf is om hom vir die vakansie te hê, is *dit* heeltemal niks teen hoe Harry voel nie.

Hy mis Hogwarts so erg dis of hy gedurig maagpyn het. Hy mis die kasteel met sy geheime gange en sy spoke, sy klasse (wel, miskien nie Snerp, die towerdrankie-onderwyser, s’n nie), die pos wat deur uile gebring word, die heerlike etes in die Groot Saal, sy hemelbed in die slaapsaal daar in die toring, die besoeke aan die boswagter, Hagrid, in sy hut langs die verbode woud en bowenal Kwiddiek, die gewildste spel in die towerwêreld (ses lang doelpale, vier vlieënde balle en veertien spelers op besems).

Die oomblik toe Harry by die huis ingestap het, het oom Vernon al sy toorboeke, sy towerstaf, kleed, hekseketel en die vlagskip van alle resies-besems, die Nimbus Tweeduisend, in die kas onder die trap toegesluit. Wat gaan dit die Dursleys aan as Harry sy plek in die Kwiddiekspan verloor omdat hy die hele somer nie kon oefen nie? Wat traak dit hulle as Harry moet teruggaan skool toe, sonder dat hy aan sy huiswerk geraak het? Die Dursleys is wat towenaars Moggels noem (nie ’n druppel towerbloed in hul are nie), en vir hulle is dit ’n groot skande om ’n towenaar in die familie te hê. Oom Vernon het selfs vir Hedwig, Harry se uil, in haar hok toegesluit sodat sy nie boodskappe na mense in die towerwêreld kan dra nie.

Harry lyk glad nie soos die res van sy familie nie. Oom Vernon is groot en het omtrent nie ’n nek nie, maar wel ’n enorme swart moestas; tant Petunia is benerig, met ’n gesig soos ’n perd; Dudley is blond en pienk en so dik soos ’n varkie. Harry, daarenteen, is klein en maer, met blink vonkelende groen oë en gitswart hare wat altyd deurmekaar is. Hy dra ’n

ronde brilletjie en op sy voorkop is 'n litteken in die vorm van 'n weer-
ligstraal.

Dis hierdie litteken wat Harry so besonders maak, selfs vir 'n towenaar. Hierdie litteken is al wat op Harry se geheimsinnige verlede dui, die rede hoekom hy elf jaar gelede op die Dursleys se voorstoep neergesit is.

Toe hy een jaar oud was, het Harry op 'n manier aan die lewe gebly na 'n vloek oor hom uitgespreek is deur die grootste donker towenaar van alle tye, Heer Woldemort, 'n man wie se naam die meeste towenaars en hekse te bang is om te sê. Harry se ma en pa is dood tydens hierdie aanval deur Woldemort, maar Harry het net 'n litteken oorgehou en om die een of ander rede – niemand weet hoekom nie – is Woldemort se mag vernietig die oomblik toe hy nie vir Harry kon doodmaak nie.

Gevolglik is Harry deur sy oorlede ma se suster en haar man grootge-
maak. Vir tien jaar lank het hy by die Dursleys gewoon, en die Dursleys se storie geglo dat hy die litteken gekry het in die motorongeluk waarin sy ouers dood is, en nooit verstaan waarom hy snaakse dinge laat gebeur sonder dat hy dit bedoel het nie.

En toe, presies 'n jaar gelede, het Hogwarts aan Harry geskryf en die hele storie het op die lappe gekom. Harry is na die towenaarskool waar hy en sy litteken spoedig beroemd geword het . . . maar nou is die skool-
jaar verby, en hy is terug by die Dursleys vir die somer, terug waar hy be-
handel word soos 'n hond wat in iets stinks gerol het.

Die Dursleys het nie eens onthou dat dit vandag Harry se twaalfde ver-
jaardag is nie. Hy het uit die aard van die saak nie veel verwag nie; hulle
het hom nog nooit 'n ordentlike present gegee nie, nie eens 'n koek nie –
maar om dit darem heeltemal te ignoreer . . .

Net toe kug oom Vernon vernaam en sê, “Soos julle almal weet, is van-
dag 'n besondere dag.”

Harry kyk op, hy kan dit skaars glo.

“Dit gaan heel waarskynlik die dag wees waarop ek die transaksie van
my lewe beklink,” sê oom Vernon.

Harry tel sy roosterbrood op. Natuurlik, dink hy bitter. Oom Vernon
praat oor die simpele ete. Dis al waaroor hy die afgelope twee weke praat.
Die een of ander ryk bouer en sy vrou gaan by hulle kom eet en oom Ver-
non hoop om 'n groot bestelling uit hom te kry (oom Vernon se maat-
skappy maak bore).

“Ek stel voor dat ons nog een keer deur die skedule werk,” sê oom
Vernon. “Teen agtuur moet almal op hul poste wees. Petunia, waar sal jy
wees – ?”

“In die sitkamer,” sê tant Petunia dadelik, “gereed om ons gaste met
grasie in ons woning welkom te heet.”

“Goed, goed. En Dudley?”

“Ek sal regstaan om die deur oop te maak.” Dudley skakel 'n vieslike,

aanstellerige glimlaggie aan. “Mag ek u jasse neem, mnr. en mev. Mason?”

“Hulle sal hom *opeet!*” skree tant Petunia ekstaties.

“Uitstekend, Dudley,” sê oom Vernon. Toe draai hy na Harry. “En jy?”

“Ek sal in my kamer wees, doodstil bly en maak of ek nie daar is nie,” sê Harry toonloos.

“Presies,” sê oom Vernon onvriendelik. “Ek sal hulle na die sitkamer vergesel en jou voorstel, Petunia, en drankies skink. Teen kwart oor agt —”

“Roep ek julle vir ete,” sê tant Petunia.

“En Dudley, jy sal sê —”

“Mag ek u na die eetkamer vergesel, mev. Mason?” sê Dudley en bied sy vet arm vir ’n denkbeeldige vrou aan.

“Wat ’n perfekte klein heer!” snuif tant Petunia.

“En jy?” vra oom Vernon vir Harry.

“Ek sal in my kamer wees, doodstil bly en maak of ek nie daar is nie,” sê Harry.

“Presies. Nou, ons moet hard probeer om etlike goed beplande komplimente tydens die ete uit te deel. Petunia, enige voorstelle?”

“Vernon het my vertel wat ’n *uitstekende* potjie gholf u speel, mnr. Mason . . . Sê tog vir my, waar het u daardie rok gekoop, mev. Mason . . .”

“Perfek . . . Dudley?”

“Wat van: ‘Ons moes ’n opstel oor ons held skryf, mnr. Mason, en ek het oor u geskryf.’”

Dit is te veel vir sowel tant Petunia as Harry. Tant Petunia bars in trane uit en omhels haar seun, terwyl Harry onder die tafel induik sodat hulle nie moet sien hoe hy lag nie.

“En jy, boet?”

Harry moet baklei om sy lag te hou toe hy weer bo die tafel verskyn.

“Ek sal in my kamer wees, doodstil bly en maak of ek nie daar is nie,” sê hy.

“Dis net mooi presies wat jy sal doen,” sê oom Vernon ferm. “Die Masons weet niks van jou af nie en dis hoe dit gaan bly. Na ete sal jy vir mev. Mason terugneem sitkamer toe vir koffie, Petunia, en ek sal die gesprek in die rigting van bore stuur. As ons gelukkig is, is die transaksie beklink en onderteken voor die *Nuus om Tien*. Teen môre hierdie tyd soek ons ’n vakansiehuis in Majorka.”

Hieroor voel Harry nie in die minste opgewonde nie. Hy dink nie die Dursleys gaan meer van hom hou in Majorka as hier in Ligusterlaan nie.

“Reg — ek moet dorp toe gaan om my en Dudley se aandbaadjies op te tel. En jy,” sê hy grommend vir Harry, “bly uit jou tante se pad terwyl sy die huis skoonmaak.”

Harry gaan by die agterdeur uit. Dit is ’n helder sonskyndag. Hy stap oor die grasperk, sak neer op die bank in die tuin en neurie by homself, “Veels geluk liewe Harry omdat jy verjaar . . .”

Geen kaartjies, geen presente en die hele aand lank moet hy maak of hy nie bestaan nie. Mistroostig staar hy na die heining. Hy het nog nooit so alleen gevoel nie. Meer as enigiets by Hogwarts, meer as om Kwiddiek te speel, mis Harry sy beste vriende, Ron Weasley en Hermien la Grange. Dit lyk egter nie of hulle hom mis nie. Die hele somer het nie een van hulle vir hom geskryf nie, hoewel Ron vir Harry op die stasie gesê het hy moet kom kuier.

Maar sonder tal was Harry op die punt om Hedwig se hok oop te toor en haar met 'n brief na Ron en Hermien te stuur, maar hy wil nie die kans waag nie. Minderjarige towenaars mag nie buite die skool toor nie. Harry het dit nie vir die Dursleys gesê nie; hy weet dis net hul vrees dat hy hulle almal in miskruiers sal verander, wat keer dat hulle hom saam met sy towerstaf en sy besemstok in die kas onder die trap toesluit. Vir die eerste twee weke het Harry dit gate uit geniet om allerhande opgemaakte woorde binnensmonds te mompel en te kyk hoe Dudley uit die kamer hardloop, so vinnig as wat sy vet bene hom kan dra. Maar die lang stilte van Ron en Hermien laat hom egter so afgesny van die towerwêreld voel, dis nie eens meer pret om vir Dudley die skrik op die lyf te jaag nie – en nou het Ron en Hermien nog sy verjaardag ook vergeet.

Wat sal hy nie gee vir 'n boodskap van Hogwarts af nie? Van enige heks of toenaar! Hy sal selfs bly wees om sy aartsvyand, Draco Malfoy, te sien, net om seker te wees dat alles nie bloot 'n droom was nie . . .

Nie dat die jaar by Hogwarts net pret was nie. Aan die einde van die laaste kwartaal het Harry van aangesig tot aangesig gekom met niemand anders nie as Woldemort. Woldemort is dalk net 'n skaduwee van sy ou self, maar hy is nog steeds vreesaanjaend, steeds geslepe, steeds vas van plan om sy mag te herwin. Vir die tweede keer het Harry deur Woldemort se kloue geglip, maar dit was 'n noue ontkoming. Nou nog, weke later, word Harry in die nag wakker, koud van die sweet, en dan wonder hy waar Woldemort is en hy onthou die woedende gesig en die wyd-gerekte, kranksinnige oë . . .

Skielik sit Harry kiertsregop op die tuinbank. Hy het heel ingedagte na die heining sit en staar – *en die heining staar sowaar terug*. Twee enorme groen oë het tussen die blare verskyn.

Harry spring orent net toe hy 'n spottende stem oor die gras hoor aankom.

“Ek weet tog watter dag dit is,” sing Dudley terwyl hy nader waggel. Die groot oë knipper en verdwyn.

“Wat?” sê Harry, maar hy neem sy oë nie van die heining af nie.

“Ek weet watter dag dit is,” herhaal Dudley en stap tot voor hom.

“Mooi skoot,” sê Harry. “Uiteindelik ken jy die dae van die week.”

“Vandag is jou *verjaardag*,” sê Dudley spottend. “Waar's jou kaartjies? Of het jy nie eens vriende in daardie mal plek nie?”

“Jy moet liefwer nie dat jou ma hoor dat jy van my skool praat nie,” sê Harry kil.

Dudley pluk sy broek op, wat aanhou afsak oor sy vet sitvlak.

“Hoekom kyk jy so na die heining?” vra hy agterdogtig.

“Ek probeer dink wat die beste towerspreuk is wat dit sal laat brand,” sê Harry.

Dudley steier agteroor, ’n benoude trek op sy vet gesig.

“Jy k-kan nie – Pa’t gesê jy mag nie t-toor – hy’t gesê hy sal jou uit die huis gooi – en daar’s nêrens anders waarheen jy kan gaan nie – jy’t nie eens *vriende* wat jou sal vat nie –”

“*Hiekerie diekerie!*” sê Harry in ’n kwaai stem. “Hokus pokus . . . skwiggel wiggel . . .”

“MAAAAA!” tjank Dudley en struikel oor sy voete toe hy huis toe laat vat. “MAAAAA! Hy doen jy weet wat!”

Hierdie oomblik se pret kom Harry duur te staan. Hoewel nóg Dudley, nóg die heining iets oorgekom het, en hoewel tant Petunia goed weet dat hy nie getoor het nie, moet hy nogtans koes toe sy wild met die seperige braaipan na hom swaai. Toe gee sy vir hom ’n spul werk om te doen, met die belofte dat hy eers weer sal eet wanneer hy die dag klaar is.

Terwyl Dudley rondhang en toekyk en roomyse eet, was Harry vensters, maak die kar skoon, sny die gras, doen die randjies, snoei en gee die rose water en verf die tuinbank. Die son is bloedig warm en brand sy nek. Harry weet hy moes nie in die lokval getrap het nie, maar Dudley het presies gesê wat Harry self gedink het . . . dat hy nie regtig vriende by Hogwarts het nie . . .

As hulle die beroemde Harry Potter darem nou kan sien, dink hy boosaardig terwyl hy mis oor die blombeddings strooi. Sy rug wil afbreek en die sweet loop oor sy gesig.

Dis na halfagt in die aand en hy is doodmoeg toe hy uiteindelik hoor hoe tant Petunia hom roep.

“Kom in! En trap op die koerante!”

Harry is bly dat hy in die koelte van die blinkskoon kombuis kan kom. Die aand se poeding staan bo-op die yskas: ’n yslike berg geklopte room en versuikerde viooltjies. ’n Tamaai varkboud sis in die oond.

“Eet vinnig! Die Masons is amper hier!” snou tant Petunia hom toe en wys na twee snye brood en ’n homp kaas op die kombuistafel. Sy het reeds haar salmkleurige skemerrok aan.

Harry was sy hande en slaan sy karige maal weg. Die oomblik toe hy klaar is, gryp tant Petunia sy bord. “Kamer toe! Skoert!”

Toe hy verby die deur na die woonkamer stap, vang Harry ’n glimp van oom Vernon en Dudley in strikdasse en aandbaadjies. Hy is skaars bo of die deurklokkie lui en oom Vernon se rooi gesig verskyn aan die voet van die trappe.

"Onthou, seun – een geluid . . ."

Op sy tone sluip Harry na sy kamer, stoot die deur toe en draai om met die idee om op sy bed neer te slaan.

Die probleem is dat iemand reeds daar sit.



CHAPTER TWO



DOBBY'S WARNING

Harry managed not to shout out, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Harry knew instantly that this was what had been watching him out of the garden hedge that morning.

As they stared at each other, Harry heard Dudley's voice from the hall.

"May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm- and

leg-holes.

“Er — hello,” said Harry nervously.

“Harry Potter!” said the creature in a high-pitched voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. “So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir . . . Such an honor it is. . . .”

“Th-thank you,” said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, “What are you?” but thought it would sound too rude, so instead he said, “Who are you?”

“Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf,” said the creature.

“Oh — really?” said Harry. “Er — I don’t want to be rude or anything, but — this isn’t a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom.”

Aunt Petunia’s high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

“Not that I’m not pleased to meet you,” said Harry quickly, “but, er, is there any particular reason you’re here?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” said Dobby earnestly. “Dobby has come to tell you, sir . . . it is difficult, sir . . . Dobby wonders where to begin. . . .”

“Sit down,” said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears — very noisy tears.

“*S-sit down!*” he wailed. “*Never . . . never ever . . .*”

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I didn’t mean to offend you or anything —”

“Offend Dobby!” choked the elf. “Dobby has *never* been asked to

sit down by a wizard — like an *equal* —”

Harry, trying to say “Shh!” and look comforting at the same time, ushered Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccoughing, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At last he managed to control himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of watery adoration.

“You can’t have met many decent wizards,” said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then, without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting, “*Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!*”

“Don’t — what are you doing?” Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed — Hedwig had woken up with a particularly loud screech and was beating her wings wildly against the bars of her cage.

“Dobby had to punish himself, sir,” said the elf, who had gone slightly cross-eyed. “Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir. . . .”

“Your family?”

“The wizard family Dobby serves, sir. . . . Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever. . . .”

“Do they know you’re here?” asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

“Oh, no, sir, no . . . Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir —”

“But won’t they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?”

“Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself

for something, sir. They lets Dobby get on with it, sir. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments. . . .”

“But why don’t you leave? Escape?”

“A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free . . . Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir. . . .”

Harry stared.

“And I thought I had it bad staying here for another four weeks,” he said. “This makes the Dursleys sound almost human. Can’t anyone help you? Can’t I?”

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn’t spoken. Dobby dissolved again into wails of gratitude.

“Please,” Harry whispered frantically, “please be quiet. If the Dursleys hear anything, if they know you’re here —”

“Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby . . . Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew. . . .”

Harry, who was feeling distinctly hot in the face, said, “Whatever you’ve heard about my greatness is a load of rubbish. I’m not even top of my year at Hogwarts; that’s Hermione, she —”

But he stopped quickly, because thinking about Hermione was painful.

“Harry Potter is humble and modest,” said Dobby reverently, his orb-like eyes aglow. “Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named —”

“Voldemort?” said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his bat ears and moaned, “Ah, speak not the name, sir! Speak not the name!”

“Sorry,” said Harry quickly. “I know lots of people don’t like it.

My friend Ron —”

He stopped again. Thinking about Ron was painful, too.

Dobby leaned toward Harry, his eyes wide as headlights.

“Dobby heard tell,” he said hoarsely, “that Harry Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time, just weeks ago . . . that Harry Potter escaped *yet again*.”

Harry nodded and Dobby’s eyes suddenly shone with tears.

“Ah, sir,” he gasped, dabbing his face with a corner of the grubby pillowcase he was wearing. “Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he *does* have to shut his ears in the oven door later. . . . *Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts.*”

There was a silence broken only by the chink of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon’s voice.

“W-what?” Harry stammered. “But I’ve got to go back — term starts on September first. It’s all that’s keeping me going. You don’t know what it’s like here. I don’t *belong* here. I belong in your world — at Hogwarts.”

“No, no, no,” squeaked Dobby, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped. “Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger.”

“Why?” said Harry in surprise.

“There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year,” whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. “Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too

important, sir!”

“What terrible things?” said Harry at once. “Who’s plotting them?”

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head frantically against the wall.

“All right!” cried Harry, grabbing the elf’s arm to stop him. “You can’t tell me. I understand. But why are you warning *me*?” A sudden, unpleasant thought struck him. “Hang on — this hasn’t got anything to do with Vol- — sorry — with You-Know-Who, has it? You could just shake or nod,” he added hastily as Dobby’s head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

“Not — not *He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named*, sir —”

But Dobby’s eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely lost.

“He hasn’t got a brother, has he?”

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

“Well then, I can’t think who else would have a chance of making horrible things happen at Hogwarts,” said Harry. “I mean, there’s Dumbledore, for one thing — you know who Dumbledore is, don’t you?”

Dobby bowed his head.

“Albus Dumbledore is the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby has heard Dumbledore’s powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his strength. But, sir” — Dobby’s voice dropped to an urgent whisper — “there are powers Dumbledore doesn’t . . . powers no decent wizard . . .”

And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry's desk lamp, and started beating himself around the head with earsplitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle Vernon coming into the hall, calling, "Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!"

"Quick! In the closet!" hissed Harry, stuffing Dobby in, shutting the door, and flinging himself onto the bed just as the door handle turned.

"What — the — *devil* — are — you — doing?" said Uncle Vernon through gritted teeth, his face horribly close to Harry's. "You've just ruined the punch line of my Japanese golfer joke. . . . One more sound and you'll wish you'd never been born, boy!"

He stomped flat-footed from the room.

Shaking, Harry let Dobby out of the closet.

"See what it's like here?" he said. "See why I've got to go back to Hogwarts? It's the only place I've got — well, I *think* I've got friends."

"Friends who don't even *write* to Harry Potter?" said Dobby slyly.

"I expect they've just been — wait a minute," said Harry, frowning. "How do *you* know my friends haven't been writing to me?"

Dobby shuffled his feet.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby. Dobby did it for the best —"

"*Have you been stopping my letters?*"

"Dobby has them here, sir," said the elf. Stepping nimbly out of Harry's reach, he pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of

the pillowcase he was wearing. Harry could make out Hermione's neat writing, Ron's untidy scrawl, and even a scribble that looked as though it was from the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at Harry.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry. . . . Dobby hoped . . . if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him . . . Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir. . . ."

Harry wasn't listening. He made a grab for the letters, but Dobby jumped out of reach.

"Harry Potter will have them, sir, if he gives Dobby his word that he will not return to Hogwarts. Ah, sir, this is a danger you must not face! Say you won't go back, sir!"

"No," said Harry angrily. "Give me my friends' letters!"

"Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice," said the elf sadly.

Before Harry could move, Dobby had darted to the bedroom door, pulled it open, and sprinted down the stairs.

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang after him, trying not to make a sound. He jumped the last six steps, landing catlike on the hall carpet, looking around for Dobby. From the dining room he heard Uncle Vernon saying, ". . . tell Petunia that very funny story about those American plumbers, Mr. Mason. She's been dying to hear . . ."

Harry ran up the hall into the kitchen and felt his stomach disappear.

Aunt Petunia's masterpiece of a pudding, the mountain of cream and sugared violets, was floating up near the ceiling. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby.

“No,” croaked Harry. “Please . . . they’ll kill me. . . .”

“Harry Potter must say he’s not going back to school —”

“Dobby . . . please . . .”

“Say it, sir —”

“I can’t —”

Dobby gave him a tragic look.

“Then Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter’s own good.”

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash. Cream splattered the windows and walls as the dish shattered. With a crack like a whip, Dobby vanished.

There were screams from the dining room and Uncle Vernon burst into the kitchen to find Harry, rigid with shock, covered from head to foot in Aunt Petunia’s pudding.

At first, it looked as though Uncle Vernon would manage to gloss the whole thing over. (“Just our nephew — very disturbed — meeting strangers upsets him, so we kept him upstairs. . . .”) He shooed the shocked Masons back into the dining room, promised Harry he would flay him to within an inch of his life when the Masons had left, and handed him a mop. Aunt Petunia dug some ice cream out of the freezer and Harry, still shaking, started scrubbing the kitchen clean.

Uncle Vernon might still have been able to make his deal — if it hadn’t been for the owl.

Aunt Petunia was just passing around a box of after-dinner mints when a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window, dropped a letter on Mrs. Mason’s head, and swooped out again. Mrs. Mason screamed like a banshee and ran from the house shouting about lunatics. Mr. Mason stayed just long enough to tell the Dursleys

that his wife was mortally afraid of birds of all shapes and sizes, and to ask whether this was their idea of a joke.

Harry stood in the kitchen, clutching the mop for support, as Uncle Vernon advanced on him, a demonic glint in his tiny eyes.

“Read it!” he hissed evilly, brandishing the letter the owl had delivered. “Go on — read it!”

Harry took it. It did not contain birthday greetings.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was used at your place of residence this evening at twelve minutes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to perform spells outside school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, Paragraph C).

We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity that risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks’ Statute of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays!

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Mafalda Hopkirk". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid, with a large, stylized 'M' at the beginning.

Mafalda Hopkirk

IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE

Ministry of Magic

Harry looked up from the letter and gulped.

“You didn’t tell us you weren’t allowed to use magic outside school,” said Uncle Vernon, a mad gleam dancing in his eyes. “Forgot to mention it. . . . Slipped your mind, I daresay. . . .”

He was bearing down on Harry like a great bulldog, all his teeth bared. “Well, I’ve got news for you, boy. . . . I’m locking you up. . . . You’re never going back to that school . . . never . . . and if you try and magic yourself out — they’ll expel you!”

And laughing like a maniac, he dragged Harry back upstairs.

Uncle Vernon was as bad as his word. The following morning, he paid a man to fit bars on Harry’s window. He himself fitted a cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening. Otherwise, he was locked in his room around the clock.

Three days later, the Dursleys were showing no sign of relenting, and Harry couldn’t see any way out of his situation. He lay on his bed watching the sun sinking behind the bars on the window and wondered miserably what was going to happen to him.

What was the good of magicking himself out of his room if Hogwarts would expel him for doing it? Yet life at Privet Drive had reached an all-time low. Now that the Dursleys knew they weren’t going to wake up as fruit bats, he had lost his only weapon. Dobby might have saved Harry from horrible happenings at Hogwarts, but the way things were going, he’d probably starve to death anyway.

The cat-flap rattled and Aunt Petunia's hand appeared, pushing a bowl of canned soup into the room. Harry, whose insides were aching with hunger, jumped off his bed and seized it. The soup was stone-cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig's cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bottom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

"It's no good turning your beak up at it — that's all we've got," said Harry grimly.

He put the empty bowl back on the floor next to the cat-flap and lay back down on the bed, somehow even hungrier than he had been before the soup.

Supposing he was still alive in another four weeks, what would happen if he didn't turn up at Hogwarts? Would someone be sent to see why he hadn't come back? Would they be able to make the Dursleys let him go?

The room was growing dark. Exhausted, stomach rumbling, mind spinning over the same unanswerable questions, Harry fell into an uneasy sleep.

He dreamed that he was on show in a zoo, with a card reading UNDERAGE WIZARD attached to his cage. People goggled through the bars at him as he lay, starving and weak, on a bed of straw. He saw Dobby's face in the crowd and shouted out, asking for help, but Dobby called, "Harry Potter is safe there, sir!" and vanished. Then the Dursleys appeared and Dudley rattled the bars of the cage, laughing at him.

"Stop it," Harry muttered as the rattling pounded in his sore head.

“Leave me alone . . . cut it out . . . I’m trying to sleep. . . .”

He opened his eyes. Moonlight was shining through the bars on the window. And someone *was* goggling through the bars at him: a freckle-faced, red-haired, long-nosed someone.

Ron Weasley was outside Harry’s window.

Dobbi se Waarskuwing

Dis so hittete of Harry gil hardop. Die gedroeggie op die bed het groot vlermuise en groen uitpeuloë so groot soos tennisballe. Harry weet dadelik dis die einste oë wat daardie oggend uit die heining na hom gestaar het.

Terwyl die twee na mekaar kyk, hoor Harry Dudley se stem onder in die voorportaal.

“Kan ek u jasse neem, mnr. en mev. Mason?”

Net toe glip die gediertetjie van die bed af en buig so laag dat die punt van sy lang dun neus aan die mat raak. Harry sien hy het iets aan wat soos 'n ou kussingsloop lyk, met gate vir die arms en bene.

“H'm – hallo,” sê Harry verbouereerd.

“Harry Potter!” sê die gedroeggie in 'n hoë, skril stem wat, Harry is seker, tot onder die trappe gehoor kan word. “Dis al so lank dat Dobbi u wil ontmoet, meneer . . . Dis so 'n eer . . .”

“D-dankie,” sê Harry, en hy skuifel al teen die muur langs en gaan sit op die stoel by sy lessenaar, langs Hedwig wat in haar kou sit en slaap. Hy wil vra, “Wat is jy nou eintlik?” maar besluit dat dit te ongeskik sal klink, dus sê hy, “Wie is jy?”

“Dobbi, meneer. Net Dobbi. Dobbi die huis-elf,” sê die gediertetjie.

“O – regtig?” sê Harry. “H'm – ek wil nou nie onbeskof of iets wees nie, maar – dis regtig nie 'n goeie idee om juis *nou* 'n huis-elf in my kamer te hê nie.”

Tant Petunia se skel, vals lag klink op uit die sitkamer. Die elf laat sak sy kop.

“Nie dat ek nie bly is om jou te ontmoet nie,” sê Harry vinnig, “maar, h'm, is daar dalk 'n spesifieke rede hoekom jy hier is?”

“O ja, meneer,” sê Dobbi ernstig, “Dobbi het gekom om iets vir u te sê, meneer . . . dit is moeilik, sien . . . Dobbi wonder waar om te begin . . .”

“Sit,” sê Harry beleef en wys na die bed.

Tot sy verbystering bars die elf in trane uit – baie raserige trane.

“S-sit!” kerm hy. “*Nooit . . . ooit ooit . . .*”

Harry is seker die stemme daar onder het vir 'n oomblik geweifel.

"'Ek is jammer," fluister hy, "ek het nie bedoel om aanstoot of iets te gee nie."

"Aanstoot gee!" wurg die elf dit uit. "Nog nooit het 'n towenaar vir Dobbi gevra om te sit nie – soos 'n gelyke –"

Harry, wat sy bes doen om "Sjji!" te sê en terselfdertyd vertroostend te lyk, stoot vir Dobbi na die bed waar hy aan die hik gaan en net soos 'n groot en baie lelike pop lyk. Uiteindelik kry hy dit reg om op te hou hik. Toe sit hy daar met sy groot oë vol tranerige aanbidding op Harry gerig.

"Dan het jy seker nog nie ordentlike towenaars ontmoet nie," sê Harry in 'n poging om die elf op te beur.

Dobbi skud sy kop. Toe, sonder enige waarskuwing, spring hy op, stamp sy kop verwoed teen die venster en skree, "Stoute Dobbi! Stoute Dobbi!"

"Moenie – wat maak jy?" fluister Harry. Hy spring op en druk vir Dobbi terug op die bed. Hedwig skrik wakker met 'n besonder harde krys-gekluid en slaan wild met haar vlerke teen die tralies van haar kou.

"Dobbi moet homself straf, meneer," sê die elf, wat nou skoon oormekaar kyk. "Dobbi het amper lelike dinge oor sy familie gesê, meneer . . ."

"Jou familie?"

"Die towenaarfamilie vir wie Dobbi werk, meneer . . . Dobbi is 'n huis-elf – verplig om een huis en een gesin vir ewig en altyd te dien . . ."

"Weet hulle dat jy hier is?" vra Harry nuuskierig.

Dobbi sidder.

"O nee, meneer, nee . . . Dobbi sal homself baie erg moet straf, meneer, omdat hy jou kom besoek het. Dobbi sal sy ore daarvoor in die stoof se deur moet vasslaan. As hulle ooit moet weet, meneer –"

"Maar hulle sal mos sien as jy jou ore in die stoof vasslaan?"

"Dobbi dink nie so nie, meneer. Dobbi moet homself gedurig oor iets straf, meneer. Hulle laat Dobbi maar begaan, meneer. Soms herinner hulle my dat ek ekstra strawwe moet uitdien . . ."

"Hoekom loop jy nie weg nie? Kan jy nie ontsnap nie?"

"'n Huis-elf moet bevry word, meneer. En die familie sal nooit vir Dobbi sy vryheid gee nie . . . Dobbi moet hulle dien tot sy dood toe, meneer . . ."

Harry staar.

"En ek dag ek kry swaar omdat ek nog vier weke hier moet bly," sê hy. "Dit laat die Dursleys amper menslik klink. Kan niemand jou help nie? Wat van my?"

Harry wens amper onmiddellik dat hy liever sy mond gehou het, want Dobbi los lang krete van dankbaarheid.

"Asseblief," fluister Harry benoud, "bly asseblief tog stil. As die Dursleys iets moet hoor, as hulle moet weet dat jy hier is . . ."

"Harry Potter vra of hy vir Dobbi kan help . . . Dobbi het gehoor van

Harry Potter se edelheid, maar van u goedhartigheid, meneer, het Dobbi nie geweet nie . . .”

Harry, wat teen hierdie tyd goed warm in die gesig is, sê, “Wat jy ook al oor my edelheid gehoor het, dis alles ’n spul twak. Ek het nie eens eerste gestaan by Hogwarts nie, Hermien het, sy –”

Hy breek net daar af, want dis pynlik om aan Hermien te dink.

“Harry Potter is nederig en beskeie,” sê Dobbi vol eerbied en sy groot ronde oë gloei. “Harry Potter praat nie oor sy triomf oor Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Moet-Word-Nie.”

“Woldemort?” sê Harry.

Dobbi klap sy hande oor sy vlermuise en kerm, “Ag, moenie daardie naam sê nie, meneer! Moenie die naam sê nie!”

“Jammer,” sê Harry vinnig. “Ek ken tonne mense wat nie daarvan hou nie – my vriend, Ron –”

Weer breek hy af. Om aan Ron te dink, is net so pynlik.

Dobbi leun oor na Harry en sy oë is so groot soos koplampe.

“Dobbi het mense hoor sê,” sê hy skor, “dat Harry Potter die Donker Heer ’n tweede keer ontmoet het, net ’n paar weke gelede . . . en dat Harry Potter weer ontsnap het.”

Harry knik en skielik blink Dobbi se oë van die trane.

“Ag, meneer,” snik hy en druk sy gesig droog met ’n hoekie van die smerige kussingsloop wat hy aan het. “Harry Potter is dapper en waaghalsig! Hy is al deur soveel gevare! Maar Dobbi het gekom om Harry Potter te beskerm, om hom te waarsku, al moet hy ook later sy ore in die stoof se deur vasslaan . . . *Harry Potter moenie teruggaan na Hogwarts toe nie.*”

Daar is ’n stilte wat net verbreek word deur die geklink van messe en vurke onder in die eetkamer en die dowwe gedreun van oom Vernon se stem.

“W-wat?” stamel Harry. “Maar ek *moet* teruggaan – die kwartaal begin op die eerste September. Dis al wat my aan die gang hou. Jy’t nie ’n idee hoe dit hier is nie. Ek *hoort* nie hier nie. Ek hoort in jou wêreld – by Hogwarts.”

“Nee, nee, nee,” piep Dobbi en skud sy kop so woes dat sy ore wapper. “Harry Potter moet bly waar hy veilig is. Hy is te groot, te goed om te verloor. As Harry Potter teruggaan Hogwarts toe, sal hy in lewensgevaar verkeer.”

“Hoekom?” vra Harry verbaas.

“Daar is ’n sameswering, Harry Potter. ’n Komplot om hierdie jaar die vreeslikste dinge by die Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery te laat gebeur,” fluister Dobbi en skielik bewe hy van kop tot tone. “Dobbi weet al maande lank hiervan, meneer. Harry Potter moet homself nie in gevaar stel nie. Hy is te belangrik, meneer!”

“Watter vreeslike dinge?” vra Harry dadelik. “Wie is die samesweerders?”

Dobbi maak ’n snaakse wurggeluid en kap sy kop soos ’n mal ding teen die muur.

“Goed, goed!” roep Harry uit en gryp die elf aan die arm om hom te keer. “Jy mag nie sê nie, ek verstaan. Maar hoekom waarsku jy vir my?” Dis of ’n skielike onaangename gedagte hom te binne skiet. “Wag ’n bietjie – dit het nie dalk iets met Wol – jammer – Jy-Weet-Wie te doen nie, het dit? Jy hoef net jou kop te skud of te knik,” keer hy gou toe Dobbi sy kop weer eens gevaarlik na aan die muur hou.

Stadig skud Dobbi sy kop.

“Nee – nie Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie, meneer.”

Maar Dobbi se oë is wydgeriek en dis of hy vir Harry ’n wenk probeer gee, maar Harry kan nie kop of stert daarvan uitmaak nie.

“Hy het nie dalk ’n broer nie, het hy?”

Dobbi skud sy kop en sy oë is groter as tevore.

“Wel, dan weet ek regtig nie wie ’n kans sal kry om vreeslike dinge by Hogwarts te laat gebeur nie,” sê Harry. “Ek bedoel, Dompeldorius is tog daar – jy weet wie Dompeldorius is, nie waar nie?”

Dobbi buig sy kop.

“Albus Dompeldorius is die grootste skoolhoof wat Hogwarts nog gehad het. Dobbi weet dit, meneer. Dobbi het gehoor dat Dompeldorius se magte net so groot is soos Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie s’n, toe hy op sy magtigste was. Maar meneer,” Dobbi se stem sak tot ’n dringende fluistering, “daar is magte wat Dompeldorius nie . . . magte wat geen ordentlike towenaar . . .”

Voor Harry hom kan keer, spring Dobbi bo van die bed af, gryp Harry se bedlamp en slaan homself oor die kop terwyl hy luidkeels gil en skree.

Onder is dit skielik doodstil. Twee sekondes later hoor Harry, met ’n hart wat wild klop, hoe oom Vernon deur die voorportaal stap en sê, “Dudley het seker weer sy televisie aangelos, die klein niksnut.”

“Gou! In die hangkas!” sis Harry, stoot vir Dobbi in, stamp die deur toe en gooi homself op die bed net toe die deurknop draai.

“Wat – de – duiwel – vang – jy – aan?” sê oom Vernon deur geklemde kake, sy gesig verskriklik na aan Harry s’n. “Jy het so pas die hoogtepunt van my Japanese gholfgrap verongeluk . . . nog een geluid, seunie, en jy sal wens jy is nooit gebore nie!”

Op groot, plat pote stommel hy weer uit.

Bewend laat Harry vir Dobbi uit die kas kom.

“Sien jy nou hoe dit hier is?” sê hy. “Sien jy hoekom ek na Hogwarts toe moet teruggaan? Dis die enigste plek waar ek vriende het – wel, waar ek dink ek vriende het.”

“Vriende wat nie eens vir Harry Potter skryf nie?” vra Dobbi slu.

“Ek dink hulle is net – wag ’n bietjie,” sê Harry en hy frons. “Hoe weet jy dat my vriende nie vir my skryf nie?”

Dobbi skuifel sy voete.

“Harry Potter moenie vir Dobbi kwaad wees nie – Dobbi wil net help . . .”

“Het jy my briewe gevat?”

“Dobbi het hulle hier, meneer,” sê die elf. Hy tree tot buite Harry se bereik en haal ’n dik bondel briewe uit die kussingsloop. Harry kan Hermien se netjiese skriffie uitmaak en Ron se slordige gekrap en selfs ’n gekrabbel wat lyk of dit van Hogwarts se boswagter, Hagrid, af kom.

Dobbi knipper sy oë senuagtig vir Harry.

“Harry Potter moenie kwaad wees nie . . . Dobbi het gehoop . . . as Harry Potter dink sy vriende het hom vergeet . . . dan sal Harry Potter nie weer skool toe wil gaan nie, meneer . . .”

Harry hoor hom skaars. Hy gryp na die briewe, maar Dobbi spring buite bereik.

“Harry Potter kan hulle kry, meneer, as hy vir Dobbi sy woord gee dat hy nie Hogwarts toe sal gaan nie. Ag, meneer, dis ’n gevaar wat u nie moet trotseer nie. Sê u sal nie teruggaan nie!”

“Nee,” sê Harry kwaai. “En gee my vriende se briewe!”

“Dan laat Harry Potter vir Dobbi geen keuse nie,” sê die elf bedroef.

Voor Harry kan roer, nael Dobbi oor die kamervloer, pluk die deur oop – en storm met die trappe af.

Met ’n droë mond en ’n maag wat draai, sit Harry hom agterna. Hy probeer sy bes om nie ’n geluid te maak nie. Hy spring oor die laaste ses trappe, land soos ’n kat in die voorportaal en kyk rond om te sien waar Dobbi is. Vanuit die eetkamer hoor hy oom Vernon sê, “. . . vertel tog vir Petunia daardie skreeusnaakse storie oor die Amerikaanse loodgieters, mnr. Mason, sy kan nie wag om dit te hoor nie.”

Harry draf oor die voorportaal tot in die kombuis en voel hoe sy maag tot in sy skoene val.

Tant Petunia se meesterstuk van ’n poeding, die berg van room en versuikerde viooltjies, sweef hoog naby plafon. Dobbi sit gehurk bo-op ’n kas in ’n hoek van die vertrek.

“Nee,” sê Harry skor. “Asseblief . . . hulle sal my vermoor . . .”

“Harry Potter moet sê hy gaan nie weer skool toe nie –”

“Dobbi . . . asseblief . . .”

“Sê dit, meneer.”

“Ek kan nie!”

Dobbi kyk tragies na hom.

“Dan moet Dobbi dit doen, meneer, vir Harry Potter se onthalwe.”

Die poeding val en tref die vloer met ’n daverende slag. Die bak is aan

skerwe en room bespat die vensters en mure. Toe, met 'n klapgeluid soos 'n sweeps slag, verdwyn Dobbi.

Krete klink op uit die eetkamer. Oom Vernon bars die kombuis binne en sien vir Harry daar staan: bleek van die skok en van kop tot tone besmeur met tant Petunia se roompoeding.

Dit wil eers lyk of oom Vernon dit gaan regkry om die hele gedoente toe te smeer. ("Net die nefie – nie heeltemal lekker nie – vreemde mense ontstel hom, ons hou hom maar daar bo . . .") Hy lei die geskokte Masons terug na die eetkamer, belowe onderlangs vir Harry dat hy met hom sal kom afreken sodra die Masons weg is, en druk die mop in sy hande. Tant Petunia grawe 'n bietjie roomys onder uit die vrieskas en Harry, wat nog steeds rittel en beef, begin om die kombuis skoon te maak.

Oom Vernon sou dalk nog sy transaksie beklink het – as dit nie vir die uil was nie.

Tant Petunia is net besig om 'n dosie pepermentsjokolade om te stuur, toe 'n nonnetjiesuil deur die eetkamer se venster swiep, 'n brief op mev. Mason se kop laat val en weer buitentoe vlieg. Mev. Mason gil soos 'n doodsboede en hardloop al skreeuend, iets oor kranksinniges, uit die huis. Mnr. Mason bly net lank genoeg om vir die Dursleys te sê dat sy vrou tot die dood toe bang is vir voëls in alle vorms en groottes, en om te vra of dit hul idee van 'n grap is.

Harry staan in die kombuis en klou vir ondersteuning aan die mop, want oom Vernon pyl met 'n demoniese glans in sy klein ogies op hom af.

"Lees dit!" sis hy boosaardig en swaai die brief wat die uil afgelewer het rond. "Toe – lees!"

Harry neem dit. Dit is nie verjaardagwense nie.

Geagte mnr. Potter,

Dit is onder ons aandag gebring dat 'n Hang-en-Sweef-towerspel vanaand om twaalf minute oor nege by u aan huis gebruik is.

Soos u weet, word minderjarige towenaars nie toegelaat om buite die skool te toor nie. Verdere towerwerk aan u kant sal lei tot onmiddellike skorsing van genoemde skool (Ordonnansie op Redelike Beperking van Towyery deur Minderjariges, 1875, Paragraaf C).

Ons wil u ook daaraan herinner dat enige tooraktiwiteite wat die risiko dra om deur lede van die gewone gemeenskap (Moggels) waargeneem te word, as 'n ernstige misdryf beskou word, afdeling 13 van die Internasionale Konfederasie van die Towenaars se Statuut van Geheimhouding. Geniet die vakansie!

Die uwe

Mafalda Hopkirk

*Kantoor vir die Ongemagtigde Gebruik van Towerkuns
Ministerie van Towerkuns*

Harry lig sy oë en sluk swaar.

“Jy het nie vir ons gesê dat jy nie buite die skool mag toor nie,” sê oom Vernon en ’n duiwelse glinstering dans in sy oë. “Seker vergeet om dit te noem . . . moet jou ontgaan het, of hoe . . .”

Met ontblote tande soos ’n groot bulhond, pyl hy op Harry af. “Wel, het ek nuus vir jou, seunie . . . ek gaan jou toesluit . . . jy sal nooit weer na daardie skool gaan nie . . . nooit . . . en as jy jouself daar probeer uittoor – sal hulle jou uitskop!”

Hy lag soos ’n maniak terwyl hy vir Harry met die trappe opsleep.

Oom Vernon het bedoel wat hy gesê het. Die volgende oggend betaal hy ’n man om tralies voor Harry se venster vas te sweis. Hy sit self ’n katflap aan die slaapkamerdeur sodat klein bietjies kos drie maal per dag daardeur aangegee kan word. Soggens en saans laat hulle vir Harry uit om badkamer toe te gaan. Die res van die tyd is hy toegesluit in sy kamer.

Drie dae later is daar nog geen teken dat die Dursleys gaan week word nie en Harry is buite raad. Hy lê op sy bed en kyk hoe die son ondergaan agter die tralies voor sy venster en wonder mistroostig wat van hom gaan word.

Van watter nut sal dit wees as hy homself uit sy kamer probeer toor as Hogwarts hom net eenvoudig daarvoor gaan skors? Maar die lewe by Li-gusterlaan was nog nooit so sleg nie. Noudat die Dursleys weet dat hulle nie een oggend gaan wakker word en sien dat hy hulle in vrugtevlermuis verander het nie, het Harry sy enigste wapen verloor. Dobbi het dalk wel vir Harry van gruwelike dinge by Hogwarts gered, maar soos dit nou gaan, sal hy in elk geval van honger vergaan.

Die katflap kletter en tant Petunia se hand stoot ’n bakkie vol ingemaakte sop by die kamer in. Harry, wie se binnegoed van die honger pyn, spring dadelik van sy bed af op om dit te gryp. Die sop is yskoud, maar hy slaan die helfte met een sluk weg. Toe stap hy na Hedwig se hok en keer die waterige groente in haar leë kosbak uit. Hedwig pof haar vere op en gee hom ’n vuil kyk.

“Dit help nie om jou snawel daarvoor op te trek nie, dis al wat daar is,” sê Harry iesegrimmig.

Hy sit die leë bak terug op die vloer langs die katflap en gaan lê weer op sy bed. Dis of hy nou hongerder is as vóór die sop.

Sê nou hy lewe nog oor vier weke wanneer die skool begin, wat sal gebeur as hy nie by Hogwarts opdaag nie? Sal hulle iemand stuur om te kyk hoekom hy nie gekom het nie? Sal hulle dit regkry om die Dursleys te oorreed om hom te laat gaan?

Die kamer word donker. Moeg en uitgeput en met ’n maag wat rammel en ’n brein waarin dieselfde vrae oor en oor maal, raak Harry uiteindelik onrustig aan die slaap.

Hy droom hy word in 'n dieretuin ten toon gestel, met 'n kaart waarop "Minderjarige Towenaar" staan, vas aan sy hok. Mense staar deur die tralies na waar hy lê, swak en uitgehonger op 'n bed van strooi. Hy sien Dobbi se gesig in die menigte en hy roep om hulp, maar Dobbi skree bloot, "Harry Potter is veilig hier, meneer!" en verdwyn. Toe daag die Dursleys op en Dudley ratel die hok se tralies en lag hom uit.

"Hou op," mompel Harry, want die gekletter laat sy kop, wat reeds seer is, net erger klop. "Los my uit . . . gaan weg . . . ek wil slaap . . ."

Hy maak sy oë oop. Die maanlig val deur die tralies op sy kussing. En iemand staar sowaar deur die tralies na hom: iemand met 'n sproetgesig en rooi hare en 'n langerige neus.

Ron Weasley is voor Harry se kamervenster.

CHAPTER THREE



THE BURROW

Ron!” breathed Harry, creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars. “Ron, how did you — What the — ?”

Harry’s mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him. Ron was leaning out of the back window of an old turquoise car, which was parked *in midair*. Grinning at Harry from the front seats were Fred and George, Ron’s elder twin brothers.

“All right, Harry?” asked George.

“What’s been going on?” said Ron. “Why haven’t you been answering my letters? I’ve asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you’d got an official warning for using magic in front of Muggles —”

“It wasn’t me — and how did he know?”

“He works for the Ministry,” said Ron. “You *know* we’re not

supposed to do spells outside school —”

“You should talk,” said Harry, staring at the floating car.

“Oh, this doesn’t count,” said Ron. “We’re only borrowing this. It’s Dad’s, *we* didn’t enchant it. But doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with —”

“I told you, I didn’t — but it’ll take too long to explain now — look, can you tell them at Hogwarts that the Dursleys have locked me up and won’t let me come back, and obviously I can’t magic myself out, because the Ministry’ll think that’s the second spell I’ve done in three days, so —”

“Stop gibbering,” said Ron. “We’ve come to take you home with us.”

“But you can’t magic me out either —”

“We don’t need to,” said Ron, jerking his head toward the front seat and grinning. “You forget who I’ve got with me.”

“Tie that around the bars,” said Fred, throwing the end of a rope to Harry.

“If the Dursleys wake up, I’m dead,” said Harry as he tied the rope tightly around a bar and Fred revved up the car.

“Don’t worry,” said Fred, “and stand back.”

Harry moved back into the shadows next to Hedwig, who seemed to have realized how important this was and kept still and silent. The car revved louder and louder and suddenly, with a crunching noise, the bars were pulled clean out of the window as Fred drove straight up in the air. Harry ran back to the window to see the bars dangling a few feet above the ground. Panting, Ron hoisted them up into the car. Harry listened anxiously, but there was no sound from the Dursleys’

bedroom.

When the bars were safely in the back seat with Ron, Fred reversed as close as possible to Harry's window.

"Get in," Ron said.

"But all my Hogwarts stuff — my wand — my broomstick —"

"Where is it?"

"Locked in the cupboard under the stairs, and I can't get out of this room —"

"No problem," said George from the front passenger seat. "Out of the way, Harry."

Fred and George climbed catlike through the window into Harry's room. You had to hand it to them, thought Harry, as George took an ordinary hairpin from his pocket and started to pick the lock.

"A lot of wizards think it's a waste of time, knowing this sort of Muggle trick," said Fred, "but we feel they're skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow."

There was a small click and the door swung open.

"So — we'll get your trunk — you grab anything you need from your room and hand it out to Ron," whispered George.

"Watch out for the bottom stair — it creaks," Harry whispered back as the twins disappeared onto the dark landing.

Harry dashed around his room, collecting his things and passing them out of the window to Ron. Then he went to help Fred and George heave his trunk up the stairs. Harry heard Uncle Vernon cough.

At last, panting, they reached the landing, then carried the trunk through Harry's room to the open window. Fred climbed back into

the car to pull with Ron, and Harry and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window.

Uncle Vernon coughed again.

“A bit more,” panted Fred, who was pulling from inside the car. “One good push —”

Harry and George threw their shoulders against the trunk and it slid out of the window into the back seat of the car.

“Okay, let’s go,” George whispered.

But as Harry climbed onto the windowsill there came a sudden loud screech from behind him, followed immediately by the thunder of Uncle Vernon’s voice.

“THAT RUDDY OWL!”

“I’ve forgotten Hedwig!”

Harry tore back across the room as the landing light clicked on — he snatched up Hedwig’s cage, dashed to the window, and passed it out to Ron. He was scrambling back onto the chest of drawers when Uncle Vernon hammered on the unlocked door — and it crashed open.

For a split second, Uncle Vernon stood framed in the doorway; then he let out a bellow like an angry bull and dived at Harry, grabbing him by the ankle.

Ron, Fred, and George seized Harry’s arms and pulled as hard as they could.

“Petunia!” roared Uncle Vernon. “He’s getting away! HE’S GETTING AWAY!”

But the Weasleys gave a gigantic tug and Harry’s leg slid out of Uncle Vernon’s grasp — Harry was in the car — he’d slammed the

door shut —

“Put your foot down, Fred!” yelled Ron, and the car shot suddenly toward the moon.

Harry couldn’t believe it — he was free. He rolled down the window, the night air whipping his hair, and looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were all hanging, dumbstruck, out of Harry’s window.

“See you next summer!” Harry yelled.

The Weasleys roared with laughter and Harry settled back in his seat, grinning from ear to ear.

“Let Hedwig out,” he told Ron. “She can fly behind us. She hasn’t had a chance to stretch her wings for ages.”

George handed the hairpin to Ron and, a moment later, Hedwig soared joyfully out of the window to glide alongside them like a ghost.

“So — what’s the story, Harry?” said Ron impatiently. “What’s been happening?”

Harry told them all about Dobby, the warning he’d given Harry and the fiasco of the violet pudding. There was a long, shocked silence when he had finished.

“Very fishy,” said Fred finally.

“Definitely dodgy,” agreed George. “So he wouldn’t even tell you who’s supposed to be plotting all this stuff?”

“I don’t think he could,” said Harry. “I told you, every time he got close to letting something slip, he started banging his head against the wall.”

He saw Fred and George look at each other.

“What, you think he was lying to me?” said Harry.

“Well,” said Fred, “put it this way — house-elves have got powerful magic of their own, but they can’t usually use it without their master’s permission. I reckon old Dobby was sent to stop you coming back to Hogwarts. Someone’s idea of a joke. Can you think of anyone at school with a grudge against you?”

“Yes,” said Harry and Ron together, instantly.

“Draco Malfoy,” Harry explained. “He hates me.”

“Draco Malfoy?” said George, turning around. “Not Lucius Malfoy’s son?”

“Must be, it’s not a very common name, is it?” said Harry. “Why?”

“I’ve heard Dad talking about him,” said George. “He was a big supporter of You-Know-Who.”

“And when You-Know-Who disappeared,” said Fred, craning around to look at Harry, “Lucius Malfoy came back saying he’d never meant any of it. Load of dung — Dad reckons he was right in You-Know-Who’s inner circle.”

Harry had heard these rumors about Malfoy’s family before, and they didn’t surprise him at all. Malfoy made Dudley Dursley look like a kind, thoughtful, and sensitive boy.

“I don’t know whether the Malfoys own a house-elf. . . .” said Harry.

“Well, whoever owns him will be an old Wizarding family, and they’ll be rich,” said Fred.

“Yeah, Mum’s always wishing we had a house-elf to do the ironing,” said George. “But all we’ve got is a lousy old ghoul in the attic and gnomes all over the garden. House-elves come with big old

manors and castles and places like that; you wouldn't catch one in our house. . . .”

Harry was silent. Judging by the fact that Draco Malfoy usually had the best of everything, his family was rolling in wizard gold; he could just see Malfoy strutting around a large manor house. Sending the family servant to stop Harry from going back to Hogwarts also sounded exactly like the sort of thing Malfoy would do. Had Harry been stupid to take Dobby seriously?

“I'm glad we came to get you, anyway,” said Ron. “I was getting really worried when you didn't answer any of my letters. I thought it was Errol's fault at first —”

“Who's Errol?”

“Our owl. He's ancient. It wouldn't be the first time he'd collapsed on a delivery. So then I tried to borrow Hermes —”

“*Who?*”

“The owl Mum and Dad bought Percy when he was made prefect,” said Fred from the front.

“But Percy wouldn't lend him to me,” said Ron. “Said he needed him.”

“Percy's been acting very oddly this summer,” said George, frowning. “And he *has* been sending a lot of letters and spending a load of time shut up in his room. . . . I mean, there's only so many times you can polish a prefect badge. . . . You're driving too far west, Fred,” he added, pointing at a compass on the dashboard. Fred twiddled the steering wheel.

“So, does your dad know you've got the car?” said Harry, guessing the answer.

“Er, no,” said Ron, “he had to work tonight. Hopefully we’ll be able to get it back in the garage without Mum noticing we flew it.”

“What does your dad do at the Ministry of Magic, anyway?”

“He works in the most boring department,” said Ron. “The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.”

“The *what*?”

“It’s all to do with bewitching things that are Muggle-made, you know, in case they end up back in a Muggle shop or house. Like, last year, some old witch died and her tea set was sold to an antiques shop. This Muggle woman bought it, took it home, and tried to serve her friends tea in it. It was a nightmare — Dad was working overtime for weeks.”

“What happened?”

“The teapot went berserk and squirted boiling tea all over the place and one man ended up in the hospital with the sugar tongs clamped to his nose. Dad was going frantic — it’s only him and an old warlock called Perkins in the office — and they had to do Memory Charms and all sorts of stuff to cover it up —”

“But your dad — this car —”

Fred laughed. “Yeah, Dad’s crazy about everything to do with Muggles; our shed’s full of Muggle stuff. He takes it apart, puts spells on it, and puts it back together again. If he raided *our* house he’d have to put himself under arrest. It drives Mum mad.”

“That’s the main road,” said George, peering down through the windshield. “We’ll be there in ten minutes. . . . Just as well, it’s getting light. . . .”

A faint pinkish glow was visible along the horizon to the east.

Fred brought the car lower, and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees.

“We’re a little way outside the village,” said George. “Ottery St. Catchpole.”

Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

“Touchdown!” said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground. They had landed next to a tumbledown garage in a small yard, and Harry looked out for the first time at Ron’s house.

It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic (which, Harry reminded himself, it probably was). Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lopsided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read, THE BURROW. Around the front door lay a jumble of rubber boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.

“It’s not much,” said Ron.

“It’s *wonderful*,” said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive.

They got out of the car.

“Now, we’ll go upstairs really quietly,” said Fred, “and wait for Mum to call us for breakfast. Then, Ron, you come bounding downstairs going, ‘Mum, look who turned up in the night!’ and she’ll be all pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car.”

“Right,” said Ron. “Come on, Harry, I sleep at the — at the top —”

Ron had gone a nasty greenish color, his eyes fixed on the house. The other three wheeled around.

Mrs. Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a saber-toothed tiger.

“*Ah,*” said Fred.

“Oh, dear,” said George.

Mrs. Weasley came to a halt in front of them, her hands on her hips, staring from one guilty face to the next. She was wearing a flowered apron with a wand sticking out of the pocket.

“*So,*” she said.

“Morning, Mum,” said George, in what he clearly thought was a jaunty, winning voice.

“Have you any idea how worried I’ve been?” said Mrs. Weasley in a deadly whisper.

“Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to —”

All three of Mrs. Weasley’s sons were taller than she was, but they cowered as her rage broke over them.

“Beds empty! No note! Car gone — could have crashed — out of my mind with worry — did you care? — never, as long as I’ve lived — you wait until your father gets home, we never had trouble like this from Bill or Charlie or Percy —”

“Perfect Percy,” muttered Fred.

“YOU COULD DO WITH TAKING A LEAF OUT OF PERCY’S BOOK!” yelled Mrs. Weasley, prodding a finger in Fred’s chest. “You could have *died*, you could have been *seen*, you could have lost your father his *job* —”

It seemed to go on for hours. Mrs. Weasley had shouted herself hoarse before she turned on Harry, who backed away.

“I’m very pleased to see you, Harry, dear,” she said. “Come in and have some breakfast.”

She turned and walked back into the house and Harry, after a nervous glance at Ron, who nodded encouragingly, followed her.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle, and Harry sat down on the edge of his seat, looking around. He had never been in a wizard house before.

The clock on the wall opposite him had only one hand and no numbers at all. Written around the edge were things like *Time to make tea*, *Time to feed the chickens*, and *You’re late*. Books were stacked three deep on the mantelpiece, books with titles like *Charm Your Own Cheese*, *Enchantment in Baking*, and *One Minute Feasts — It’s Magic!* And unless Harry’s ears were deceiving him, the old radio next to the sink had just announced that coming up was “Witching Hour, with the popular singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck.”

Mrs. Weasley was clattering around, cooking breakfast a little haphazardly, throwing dirty looks at her sons as she threw sausages into the frying pan. Every now and then she muttered things like “don’t know *what* you were thinking of,” and “*never* would have believed it.”

“I don’t blame *you*, dear,” she assured Harry, tipping eight or nine sausages onto his plate. “Arthur and I have been worried about you, too. Just last night we were saying we’d come and get you ourselves

if you hadn't written back to Ron by Friday. But really" (she was now adding three fried eggs to his plate), "flying an illegal car halfway across the country — anyone could have seen you —"

She flicked her wand casually at the dishes in the sink, which began to clean themselves, clinking gently in the background.

"It was *cloudy*, Mum!" said Fred.

"You keep your mouth closed while you're eating!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

"They were starving him, Mum!" said George.

"And you!" said Mrs. Weasley, but it was with a slightly softened expression that she started cutting Harry bread and buttering it for him.

At that moment there was a diversion in the form of a small, redheaded figure in a long nightdress, who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small squeal, and ran out again.

"Ginny," said Ron in an undertone to Harry. "My sister. She's been talking about you all summer."

"Yeah, she'll be wanting your autograph, Harry," Fred said with a grin, but he caught his mother's eye and bent his face over his plate without another word. Nothing more was said until all four plates were clean, which took a surprisingly short time.

"*Blimey*, I'm tired," yawned Fred, setting down his knife and fork at last. "I think I'll go to bed and —"

"You will not," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "It's your own fault you've been up all night. You're going to de-gnome the garden for me; they're getting completely out of hand again —"

"Oh, Mum —"

“And you two,” she said, glaring at Ron and George. “You can go up to bed, dear,” she added to Harry. “You didn’t ask them to fly that wretched car —”

But Harry, who felt wide awake, said quickly, “I’ll help Ron. I’ve never seen a de-gnoming —”

“That’s very sweet of you, dear, but it’s dull work,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Now, let’s see what Lockhart’s got to say on the subject —”

And she pulled a heavy book from the stack on the mantelpiece. George groaned.

“Mum, we know how to de-gnome a garden —”

Harry looked at the cover of Mrs. Weasley’s book. Written across it in fancy gold letters were the words *Gilderoy Lockhart’s Guide to Household Pests*. There was a big photograph on the front of a very good-looking wizard with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. As always in the Wizarding world, the photograph was moving; the wizard, who Harry supposed was Gilderoy Lockhart, kept winking cheekily up at them all. Mrs. Weasley beamed down at him.

“Oh, he is marvelous,” she said. “He knows his household pests, all right, it’s a wonderful book. . . .”

“Mum *fancies* him,” said Fred, in a very audible whisper.

“Don’t be so ridiculous, Fred,” said Mrs. Weasley, her cheeks rather pink. “All right, if you think you know better than Lockhart, you can go and get on with it, and woe betide you if there’s a single gnome in that garden when I come out to inspect it.”

Yawning and grumbling, the Weasleys slouched outside with Harry behind them. The garden was large, and in Harry’s eyes, exactly what

a garden should be. The Dursleys wouldn't have liked it — there were plenty of weeds, and the grass needed cutting — but there were gnarled trees all around the walls, plants Harry had never seen spilling from every flower bed, and a big green pond full of frogs.

“Muggles have garden gnomes, too, you know,” Harry told Ron as they crossed the lawn.

“Yeah, I've seen those things they think are gnomes,” said Ron, bent double with his head in a peony bush, “like fat little Santa Clauses with fishing rods. . . .”

There was a violent scuffling noise, the peony bush shuddered, and Ron straightened up. “*This* is a gnome,” he said grimly.

“Gerroff me! Gerroff me!” squealed the gnome.

It was certainly nothing like Santa Claus. It was small and leathery looking, with a large, knobby, bald head exactly like a potato. Ron held it at arm's length as it kicked out at him with its horny little feet; he grasped it around the ankles and turned it upside down.

“This is what you have to do,” he said. He raised the gnome above his head (“Gerroff me!”) and started to swing it in great circles like a lasso. Seeing the shocked look on Harry's face, Ron added, “It doesn't *hurt* them — you've just got to make them really dizzy so they can't find their way back to the gnomeholes.”

He let go of the gnome's ankles: It flew twenty feet into the air and landed with a thud in the field over the hedge.

“Pitiful,” said Fred. “I bet I can get mine beyond that stump.”

Harry learned quickly not to feel too sorry for the gnomes. He decided just to drop the first one he caught over the hedge, but the gnome, sensing weakness, sank its razor-sharp teeth into Harry's

finger and he had a hard job shaking it off — until —

“Wow, Harry — that must’ve been fifty feet. . . .”

The air was soon thick with flying gnomes.

“See, they’re not too bright,” said George, seizing five or six gnomes at once. “The moment they know the de-gnoming’s going on they storm up to have a look. You’d think they’d have learned by now just to stay put.”

Soon, the crowd of gnomes in the field started walking away in a straggling line, their little shoulders hunched.

“They’ll be back,” said Ron as they watched the gnomes disappear into the hedge on the other side of the field. “They love it here. . . . Dad’s too soft with them; he thinks they’re funny. . . .”

Just then, the front door slammed.

“He’s back!” said George. “Dad’s home!”

They hurried through the garden and back into the house.

Mr. Weasley was slumped in a kitchen chair with his glasses off and his eyes closed. He was a thin man, going bald, but the little hair he had was as red as any of his children’s. He was wearing long green robes, which were dusty and travel-worn.

“What a night,” he mumbled, groping for the teapot as they all sat down around him. “Nine raids. Nine! And old Mundungus Fletcher tried to put a hex on me when I had my back turned. . . .”

Mr. Weasley took a long gulp of tea and sighed.

“Find anything, Dad?” said Fred eagerly.

“All I got were a few shrinking door keys and a biting kettle,” yawned Mr. Weasley. “There was some pretty nasty stuff that wasn’t my department, though. Mortlake was taken away for questioning

about some extremely odd ferrets, but that's the Committee on Experimental Charms, thank goodness. . . ."

"Why would anyone bother making door keys shrink?" said George.

"Just Muggle-baiting," sighed Mr. Weasley. "Sell them a key that keeps shrinking to nothing so they can never find it when they need it. . . . Of course, it's very hard to convict anyone because no Muggle would admit their key keeps shrinking — they'll insist they just keep losing it. Bless them, they'll go to any lengths to ignore magic, even if it's staring them in the face. . . . But the things our lot have taken to enchanting, you wouldn't believe —"

"LIKE CARS, FOR INSTANCE?"

Mrs. Weasley had appeared, holding a long poker like a sword. Mr. Weasley's eyes jerked open. He stared guiltily at his wife.

"C-cars, Molly, dear?"

"Yes, Arthur, cars," said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes flashing. "Imagine a wizard buying a rusty old car and telling his wife all he wanted to do with it was take it apart to see how it worked, while *really* he was enchanting it to make it *fly*."

Mr. Weasley blinked.

"Well, dear, I think you'll find that he would be quite within the law to do that, even if — er — he maybe would have done better to, um, tell his wife the truth. . . . There's a loophole in the law, you'll find. . . . As long as he wasn't *intending* to fly the car, the fact that the car *could* fly wouldn't —"

"Arthur Weasley, you made sure there was a loophole when you wrote that law!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "Just so you could carry on

tinkering with all that Muggle rubbish in your shed! And for your information, Harry arrived this morning in the car you weren't intending to fly!"

"Harry?" said Mr. Weasley blankly. "Harry who?"

He looked around, saw Harry, and jumped.

"Good lord, is it Harry Potter? Very pleased to meet you, Ron's told us so much about —"

"Your sons flew that car to Harry's house and back last night!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "What have you got to say about that, eh?"

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Did it go all right? I — I mean," he faltered as sparks flew from Mrs. Weasley's eyes, "that — that was very wrong, boys — very wrong indeed. . . ."

"Let's leave them to it," Ron muttered to Harry as Mrs. Weasley swelled like a bullfrog. "Come on, I'll show you my bedroom."

They slipped out of the kitchen and down a narrow passageway to an uneven staircase, which wound its way, zigzagging up through the house. On the third landing, a door stood ajar. Harry just caught sight of a pair of bright brown eyes staring at him before it closed with a snap.

"Ginny," said Ron. "You don't know how weird it is for her to be this shy. She never shuts up normally —"

They climbed two more flights until they reached a door with peeling paint and a small plaque on it, saying RONALD'S ROOM.

Harry stepped in, his head almost touching the sloping ceiling, and blinked. It was like walking into a furnace: Nearly everything in Ron's room seemed to be a violent shade of orange: the bedspread, the walls, even the ceiling. Then Harry realized that Ron had covered

nearly every inch of the shabby wallpaper with posters of the same seven witches and wizards, all wearing bright orange robes, carrying broomsticks, and waving energetically.

“Your Quidditch team?” said Harry.

“The Chudley Cannons,” said Ron, pointing at the orange bedspread, which was emblazoned with two giant black C’s and a speeding cannonball. “Ninth in the league.”

Ron’s school spellbooks were stacked untidily in a corner, next to a pile of comics that all seemed to feature *The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle*. Ron’s magic wand was lying on top of a fish tank full of frog spawn on the windowsill, next to his fat gray rat, Scabbers, who was snoozing in a patch of sun.

Harry stepped over a pack of Self-Shuffling playing cards on the floor and looked out of the tiny window. In the field far below he could see a gang of gnomes sneaking one by one back through the Weasleys’ hedge. Then he turned to look at Ron, who was watching him almost nervously, as though waiting for his opinion.

“It’s a bit small,” said Ron quickly. “Not like that room you had with the Muggles. And I’m right underneath the ghoul in the attic; he’s always banging on the pipes and groaning. . . .”

But Harry, grinning widely, said, “This is the best house I’ve ever been in.”

Ron’s ears went pink.

Die Konynenes

“Ron!” sê Harry ademloos. Hy sluip na die venster en stoot dit oop sodat hulle deur die tralies kan praat. “Ron, hoe het jy – wat de – ?”

Harry se mond val oop toe hy sien wat nou eintlik daar buite aangaan. Ron leun deur die agterste ruit van ’n ou blougroen motor wat *in die lug* geparkeer is. Ron se ouer tweelingbroers, George en Fred, grinnik vir Harry van die voorste sitplekke af.

“Hoe gaan dit, Harry?”

“Wat’s aan die gang?” sê Ron. “Hoekom antwoord jy nie my briewe nie? Ek het jou seker al twaalf keer genooi om te kom kuier en toe kom Pa huis toe en sê jy’t ’n amptelike waarskuwing gehad omdat jy voor Moggels getoor het . . .”

“Dit was nie ek nie – en hoe weet hy daarvan?”

“Hy werk vir die Ministerie,” sê Ron. “Jy *weet* tog ons mag nie buite die skool toor –”

“Hoor wie praat,” sê Harry en hy staar na die motor wat reg voor sy venster in die lug hang.

“O, dit tel nie,” sê Ron. “Ons *leen* dit net, dis Pa s’n, *ons* het dit nie getoor nie. Maar om darem voor daardie Moggels by wie jy bly, te staan en toor . . .”

“Ek sê mos, ek het nie – maar dit sal te lank vat om te verduidelik. Luister, kan julle by Hogwarts gaan sê dat die Dursleys my toegesluit het en my nie wil laat teruggaan nie? Ek kan myself nie uittoor nie, want die Ministerie sal sê dis die tweede keer in drie dae en –”

“Hou op brabbel,” sê Ron, “ons het jou kom haal.”

“Maar *julle* kan my ook nie hier uittoor nie –”

“Ons hoef nie,” sê Ron grinnikend en wys met sy kop na die voorste sitplekke. “Jy’t nie mooi gekyk wie almal hier is nie.”

“Bind dit om die tralies,” sê Fred en gooi die punt van ’n tou na Harry toe.

“As die Dursleys wakker word, is ek dood,” sê Harry, terwyl hy die tou styf om die tralies vasmaak, terwyl Fred solank die enjin vinnig laat loop.

“Moet jou nie bekommer nie,” sê Fred, “staan net terug.”

Harry gaan staan langs Hedwig se hok. Dit lyk of sy ook besef dat iets belangriks aan die gebeur is, want sy is tjoepstil. Die motor se enjin brul al harder en toe, skielik, met 'n kraakgeluid, skeur die tralies uit die venster sodat die motor die lug in klim – Harry laat vat na die venster toe en sien hoe die tralies meters bo die grond in die lug hang. Ron hys dit blaas, blaas tot binne-in die voertuig. Harry luister benoud, maar daar kom nie 'n geluid van die Dursleys se slaapkamer nie.

Toe die tralies veilig op die agterste sitplek langs Ron lê, ry Fred agteruit tot so na moontlik aan Harry se venster.

“Klim in,” sê Ron.

“Maar al my goed vir Hogwarts . . . my towerstaf . . . my besemstok . . .”

“Waar is dit?”

“Toegesluit in die kas onder die trappe, en ek kan nie uit die kamer kom nie –”

“Dis nie 'n probleem nie,” sê George van die voorste sitplek af. “Gee pad daar, Harry.”

Fred en George klouter deur die venster tot in Harry se kamer. Hulle is wonderlik, dink Harry, terwyl George 'n gewone haarnaald uit sy sak haal en die slot begin oopsteek.

“Baie towenaars dink dis tydmors om hierdie soort Moggeltruuks te ken,” sê Fred, “maar ons dink dis die moeite werd om hierdie vaardighede aan te leer, al vat dit 'n bietjie tyd.”

Daar is 'n klein klikgeluid en die deur swaai oop.

“Goed – ons sal jou trommel gaan haal – kry jy solank alles in jou kamer wat jy nodig het en gee dit vir Ron aan,” fluister George.

“Pasop vir die onderste trap, hy kraak,” fluister Harry terug, net voor die tweeling met die trappe af verdwyn.

Harry skarrel deur sy kamer, maak sy goed bymekaar en gee dit vir Ron aan. Toe gaan help hy vir Fred en George om sy trommel teen die trappe op te sleep. Harry hoor oom Vernon hoes.

Uiteindelik bereik hulle die bopunt van die trappe. Al hygend sleepdra hulle die trommel deur Harry se kamer na die oop venster. Fred klim terug in die kar om Ron te help trek en Harry en George stoot van die slaapkamer se kant. Sentimeter vir sentimeter gly die trommel oor die vensterbank.

Oom Vernon hoes weer.

“Nog net 'n entjie,” blaas Fred, wat van binne-in die motor af trek, “nog net een goeie hupstoot . . .”

Harry en George gooi hul skouers teen die trommel en dit gly deur die venster en val op die agterste sitplek.

“Kom ons maak spore,” fluister George.

Maar toe Harry op die vensterbank klim, klink daar skielik 'n harde krysgeluid agter hom op, onmiddellik gevolg deur oom Vernon se donderende stem.

“DAARDIE VERDOMDE UIL!”

“Ek het vir Hedwig vergeet!”

Harry nael oor die vertrek net toe die lig by die trappe aangaan. Hy gryp Hedwig se kou, laat vat na die venster en druk dit in Ron se hande. Hy's besig om op die laaikas onder die venster te klouter, toe oom Vernon teen die deur hamer – en dit oopvlieg.

Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde staan oom Vernon in die kosyn soos in 'n raam; toe bulk hy soos 'n verwoede bul, duik na Harry en gryp hom aan die enkel.

Ron, Fred en George gryp Harry se arms en trek so hard as hulle kan.

“Petunia!” brul oom Vernon. “Hy kom weg! HY KOM WEG!”

Die Weasleys gee 'n enorme harde pluk en Harry se been glip uit oom Vernon se greep. Harry is skaars in die kar en die deur toegeslaan, toe skree Ron, “Laat waai, Fred!” en die motor skiet weg en pyl op die maan af.

Harry kan sy oë nie glo nie – hy is vry. Hy draai die ruit af, die naglug warrel deur sy hare en toe hy terugkyk, sien hy hoe Ligusterlaan se dakke al kleiner word. Oom Vernon, tant Petunia en Dudley hang by Harry se venster uit. Hulle lyk dronkgeslaan.

“Sien julle volgende somer!” gil Harry.

Die Weasleys brul van die lag en Harry sak terug in die sitplek en glimlag van oor tot oor.

“Laat Hedwig uitkom,” sê hy vir Ron, “sy kan agter ons aan vlieg. Sy't lank laas 'n kans gehad om haar vlerke te rek.”

George gee die haarnaald aan en oomblikke later seil 'n uitgelate Hedwig die lug in en gly soos 'n skim langs hulle.

“So – wat gaan aan, Harry?” vra Ron ongeduldig. “Wat het nou eintlik gebeur?”

Harry vertel alles oor Dobbi, die waarskuwing wat hy vir Harry kom gee het en die fiasko met die viooltjiepoeding. Daar is 'n lang, geskokte stilte toe hy klaar is.

“Klink verdag,” sê Fred uiteindelik.

“Beslis,” stem George saam. “Hy wou dus nie eens sê wie kamina al daardie goed beplan nie?”

“Ek dink nie hy kon nie,” sê Harry. “Ek sê julle, elke keer dat hy op die punt is om iets te laat glip, dan kap hy sy kop teen die muur.”

Hy sien hoe Fred en George na mekaar kyk.

“Dink julle hy het vir my gelieg?” vra Harry.

“Wel,” sê Fred, “hoe sal ek sê – huis-elwe het baie sterk towermagte van hul eie, maar hulle kan dit gewoonlik nie sonder hul elenaars se toestemming gebruik nie. Ek sou sê ou Dobbi is gestuur om te keer dat jy teruggaan Hogwarts toe. Iemand se idee van 'n grap. Kan jy aan iemand by die skool dink wat 'n grief teen jou koester?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en Ron onmiddellik tesame.

“Draco Malfoy,” verduidelik Harry. “Hy haat my.”

“Draco Malfoy?” sê George en draai om na hulle. “Tog nie Lucius Malfoy se seun nie?”

“Moet wees, dis nie ’n algemene naam nie, is dit?” sê Harry. “Hoe-kom?”

“Ek het Pa al oor hom hoor praat,” sê George. “Hy was een van Jy-Weet-Wie se groot aanhangers.”

“En toe Jy-Weet-Wie verdwyn het,” sê Fred en verrek omtrent sy nek om na Harry te kyk, “het Lucius Malfoy teruggekom en gesê hy het dit glad nie bedoel nie. Watter bog – Pa reken hy was in Jy-Weet-Wie se binnekring.”

Harry het hierdie gerugte oor die Malfoys al tevore gehoor en dit het hom nie in die minste verbaas nie. Malfoy laat Dudley Dursley soos ’n liefbare, bedagsame en sensitiewe seun lyk.

“Ek weet nie of die Malfoys ’n huis-elf het nie . . .” sê Harry.

“Wel, wie s’n hy ook al mag wees, moet ’n ou towenaarfamilie met baie geld wees,” sê Fred.

“Ja, Ma wens altyd dat ons ’n huis-elf vir die strykwerk kan hê,” sê George, “maar al wat ons het, is ’n simpele ou spook in die solder en ’n spul kabouters in die tuin. Huis-elwe woon in groot ou herehuise en kastele en goed, nie in gewone huise soos ons s’n nie . . .”

Harry sê nie ’n woord nie. Te oordeel na die feit dat Draco Malfoy altyd die beste van alles het, moet sy familie in towenaargoud rol; hy kan Malfoy in ’n yslike herehuis sien pronk. Om die gesin se elf te stuur om te keer dat Harry terug Hogwarts toe gaan, klink na net mooi die soort ding wat Malfoy sal doen. Was Harry ’n bobbejaan om vir Dobbi te glo?

“Wel, ek is bly ons het jou kom haal,” sê Ron. “Ek het regtig bekommerd begin word toe jy nie eens een van my briewe beantwoord het nie. Ek het eers gedink dis Errol se skuld –”

“Wie’s Errol?”

“Ons uil. Hy’s stokoud. Dit sal nie die eerste keer wees dat hy ’n mislukking van ’n aflewering maak nie. Ek het probeer om vir Hermes te leen –”

“Wie?”

“Die uil wat Ma en Pa vir Percy gekoop het toe hy prefek geword het,” sê Fred daar van voor af.

“Maar Percy wou hom nie vir my leen nie,” sê Ron. “Hy’t hom kamma nodig gehad.”

“Percy is hierdie somer regtig eienaardig,” sê George met ’n frons. “Hy het ’n klomp briewe gestuur en hy sit ure lank in sy kamer met sy deur toegesluit . . . ek meen, ’n mens kan ’n prefekwapen ook net soveel keer blink vryf . . . Jy gaan te ver wes, Fred,” voeg hy by en wys na die kompas op die paneelbord. Fred draai die stuurwiel.

“Weet julle pa dat julle die motor het?” vra Harry, hoewel hy die antwoord reeds geraai het.

“H’m, nee,” sê Ron, “hy werk vanaand. Hopelik het ons dit terug in die garage voor Ma agterkom dat ons daarmee gevlieg het.”

“Wat doen jou pa by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns?”

“Hy werk in die verveligste departement,” sê Ron. “Die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Moggelartefakte.”

“Die *wat*?”

“Dit het te doen met as jy goeters toor wat deur Moggels gemaak is en as die goed dan weer in die Moggels se winkels of in een van hul huise beland. Soos laas jaar, toe die een of ander ou heks dood is en haar teestel aan ’n antiekwinkel verkoop is. Die Moggelvrou wat dit gekoop het, het dit huis toe geneem en tee vir haar vriende daarin probeer maak. Wat ’n nagmerrie – Pa het weke lank oortyd gewerk.”

“Wat het gebeur?”

“Die teepot het mal geraak en kokende tee oor alles gespuit. Een man is hospitaal toe met die suikertangetjie aan sy neus geklem. Pa’t hom amper doodgewerk, dis net hy en ’n ou towenaar met die naam Perkins in die kantoor, en hulle moes Geheuetowerspreuke vir die vale doen om alles toe te smeer . . .”

“Maar jou pa . . . hierdie motor . . .”

Fred lag. “Ja, Pa is dol op alles wat iets met Moggels uit te waai het, ons skuur is vol Moggelgoeters. Hy haal dit uitmekaar en sit towerspreuke daarop en bou dit dan weer op. As hy die dag ’n klopjag op *ons* huis moet doen, sal hy homself net daar moet arresteer. Hy maak my ma mal.”

“Daar’s die hoofpad,” sê George en tuur deur die voorruit. “Nog net tien minute dan’s ons daar . . . ook maar goed, dit begin al lig word . . .” ’n Dowwe pienkerige kleur raak sigbaar op die horison in die ooste.

Fred laat die kar sak en Harry sien ’n donker lappieskombers van landerye en klompies bome.

“Ons woon net buite die dorp,” sê George. “Ottyer St Catchpole . . .”

Laer en laer sak die vlieënde motor. Nou gloei die randjie van ’n helderrooi son deur die bome.

“Hier’s ons!” sê Fred toe hulle die grond met ’n ligte stampie tref. Hulle land reg langs ’n vervalte ou garage in ’n kleinerige agterplaas en vir die eerste keer sien Harry Ron-hulle se huis.

Dit lyk of dit vroeër ’n groot klipvarkhok was, maar hier en daar is ekstra vertrekke aangebou sodat dit nou etlike verdiepings hoog is, en so krom en skeef, dit moet betower wees om te kan bly staan (dis seker ook net mooi hoe dit is, dink Harry). ’n Stuk of vier, vyf skoorstene staan bo-op die rooi dak. Naby die ingang is ’n lendelam bordjie in die grond gedruk, waarop “Die Konynenes” staan. Om die voordeur lê ’n versameling

Wateristewels en 'n geroeste hekseketel. 'n Hele paar vet bruin hoenders stap op die werf rond.

"Dis nie wat wonders nie," sê Ron.

"Dit is briljant," sê Harry in sy noppies, terwyl hy aan Ligusterlaan dink.

Hulle klim uit die motor.

"Nou gaan ons baie stilletjies boontoe," sê Fred, "en wag tot Ma ons roep vir ontbyt. Dan storm jy af, Ron, en jy skree, 'Ma, kyk wie't vannag hier aangekom!' en dan sal sy so bly wees om vir Harry te sien dat niemand ooit sal weet dat ons met die motor gevlieg het nie."

"Reg," sê Ron. "Kom, Harry, ek slaap in die –"

Ron word 'n nare groen kleur en sy oë is vasgenael op die huis. Die ander drie swaai ook vinnig om.

Mevrou Weasley kom aangestap oor die werf, sodat die hoenders vinnig wegskarrel. Vir 'n kort gesette vrou met 'n andersins vriendelike gesig, lyk sy op hierdie oomblik merkwaardig baie soos 'n sabeltandtier.

"Oeps," sê Fred.

"O Griet," sê George.

Mev. Weasley steek kort voor hulle vas, hande op die heupe en staar van die een skuldige gesig na die ander. Sy dra 'n geblomde voorskoot en 'n towerstaf steek uit haar sak uit.

"O, so," sê sy.

"Goeiemôre, Mams," sê George in wat duidelik 'n opgeruimde en innemende stem moet wees.

"Kan julle miskien 'n idee vorm van hoe bekommerd ek was?" sê mev. Weasley in 'n doodse fluisterstem.

"Jammer, Ma, maar sien, ons moes –"

Al drie mev. Weasley se seuns is langer as sy, maar hulle krimp ineen toe haar woedebui oor hul koppe losbars.

"Leë beddens! Geen nota! Motor weg . . . kon verongeluk het . . . buite my sinne van kommer . . . maar gee julle om? . . . nooit, in my hele lewe . . . wag net tot jul pa by die huis is, ons het nooit sulke probleme met Bill en Charlie en Percy gehad nie . . ."

"Perfekte Percy," mompel Fred.

"JY KAN GERUS PERCY SE VOORBEELD VOLG!" gil mev. Weasley en druk haar vinger teen Fred se bors. "Julle kon dood gewees het, iemand kon julle gesien het, jul pa kan sy werk verloor –"

Dit voel asof sy nooit weer gaan ophou nie. Toe mev. Weasley haarself uiteindelik hees geskree het, draai sy na Harry wat 'n paar tree terugval.

"Ek is baie bly om jou te sien, liewe Harry," sê sy. "Kom in en kry 'n stukkie ontbyt."

Sy draai om en stap terug na die huis en nadat Harry senuagtig na Ron gekyk en Ron bemoedigend vir hom geknik het, stap hy agterna.

Die kombuis is klein en ietwat beknoop. In die middel staan 'n geskropte houttafel en stoele en Harry gaan sit op die punt van 'n stoel en kyk om hom rond. Hy was nog nooit tevore in 'n towenaar se huis nie.

Die horlosie teen die muur oorkant hom het net een wyser en glad geen syfers nie. Om die kant is goed geskryf soos "Teetyd", "Gee hoenders kos" en "Jy's laat". Op die kaggelrak is die boeke drie rye diep gepak; boeke met titels soos *Toor jou eie Kaas*, *Toor en Geniet* en *Towermaaltye in 'n Japtrap*. En tensy Harry stemme hoor, het die ou radio langs die opwasbak so pas aangekondig dat "Towertye" met die gewilde singende towenares Celestina Warbeck volgende aan die beurt is.

Mev. Weasley is in die kombuis besig om 'n groot ontbyt aanmeekaar te slaan. Sy gooi stringe worsies in die braaipan sowel as 'n paar vuil kyke na haar seuns. Elke nou en dan mompel sy goed soos "ek weet nie wat julle gedink het julle doen nie" en "ek kon my oë nie glo nie."

"Ek is nie vir jou kwaad nie, kind," verseker sy vir Harry terwyl sy 'n stuk of nege worsies in sy bord laat gly. "Ek en Arthur was baie bekommerd oor jou. Ons het net laas nag gesê ons sal self gaan kyk wat aangaan as Ron teen Vrydag nog nie van jou gehoor het nie. Maar regtig," (nou skep sy drie gebakte eiers op sy bord) "om met 'n onwettige motor halfpad oor die land te vlieg – enigeen kon julle gesien het - "

Sy lig haar towerstaf ongeërg na die opwasbak en met 'n getinkel begin die skottelgoed hulself was.

"Dit was bewolk, Ma!" sê Fred.

"Hou jou mond toe terwyl jy eet!" raas mev. Weasley.

"Hulle het hom laat verhonger, Ma!" sê George.

"Jy ook!" sê mev. Weasley, maar die uitdrukking in haar oë is heelwat sagter toe sy Harry se brood vir hom sny en botter daarop smeer.

Op daardie oomblik is daar 'n onderbreking in die vorm van 'n klein rookopfiguurtjie in 'n lang nagrok wat in die kombuis verskyn, 'n klein gilletjie los en weer vinnig uithardloop.

"Ginny," sê Ron onderlangs vir Harry. "My suster. Sy praat al die hele somer oor jou."

"H'm, sy sal jou handtekening wil hê, Harry," sê Fred met 'n grinnik, maar hy vang sy ma se oog en laat sak sy kop oor sy bord sonder om 'n verdere woord te sê. Niemand praat weer voor al vier borde silwerskoon geëet is nie, wat verbasend vinnig gebeur.

"Sjoe, maar ek is vaak," sê Fred met 'n gaap toe hy sy mes en vurk uiteindelik neersit. "Ek dink ek gaan bed toe en –"

"Nee, jy gaan nie," raas mev. Weasley. "Dis jou eie skuld dat jy die hele nag op was. Jy gaan vandag die tuin ontkabouter, hulle is besig om lelik hand-uit te ruk."

"Ag, Ma –"

"En julle twee ook," sê sy en kyk kwaai na Ron en George. "Jy kan

maar 'n bietjie bed toe gaan, kind," sê sy vir Harry. "Jy het hulle nie gevra om in daardie vervlakste motor rond te vlieg nie."

Maar Harry, wat wawyd wakker is, sê vinnig, "Ek sal vir Ron help, ek het nog nooit gesien hoe iets ontkabouter word nie –"

"Dis lief van jou, kind, maar dis vervelige werk," sê mev. Weasley. "Kom ons kyk gou wat Lockhart oor die onderwerp sê."

Sy trek 'n dik boek uit die stapel op die kaggelrak. George kreun.

"Ma, ons weet hoe om 'n tuin te ontkabouter."

Harry loer na die voorblad van mev. Weasley se boek. *Gilderoy Lockhart se Handleiding tot Huishoudelike Plae* is in sierlike goue letters daarop gedruk. Voorop is 'n groot foto van 'n baie aantreklike towenaar met krullerige blonde hare en helderblou oë. Die foto beweeg, soos altyd in die towerwêreld, en die towenaar wat, so reken Harry, Gilderoy Lockhart moet wees, knipoog parmantig vir hulle. Mev. Weasley glimlag stralend vir hom.

"O, is hy nie wonderlik nie," sê sy, "hy *ken* beslis sy huishoudelike plae, dis 'n wonderlike boek . . ."

"Ma het 'n ogie op hom," sê Fred in 'n hoorbare fluisterstem.

"Moenie stuitig wees nie, Fred," sê mev. Weasley en haar wange is redelik pienk. "Toe-toe, weg is julle as julle dan meer weet as Lockhart, en bewaar jul siel as daar 'n enkele kabouter in die tuin is wanneer ek inspeksie kom doen."

Al gapend en brommend strompel die Weasleys uit, met Harry agterna. Dis 'n groot tuin en volgens Harry lyk dit presies soos 'n tuin moet lyk. Die Dursleys sal niks daarvan hou nie – daar is baie onkruid en die gras moet gesny word – maar langs die mure staan knoetsige ou bome en in die beddings groei allerhande plante wat Harry nog nooit tevore gesien het nie en daar is tot 'n groot groen poel vol paddas.

"Moggels het ook kabouters in hul tuine, weet jy," sê Harry vir Ron toe hulle oor die grasperk stap.

"Ja, ek het daardie goed wat hulle dink kabouters is, al gesien," sê Ron en buk oor en druk sy kop in 'n pinksterroosbos. "Sulke vet klein Vader Krissmissies met visstokke . . ."

Daar is 'n woeste geskuiwel, die pinksterroosbos bewe en Ron steier orent. "Dit is 'n kabouter," sê hy grimmig.

"Los my! Los my!" skree die kabouter.

Hy lyk allermens soos Vader Krismis. Hy is klein en leeragtig, met 'n groot, knopperige kaal kop presies soos 'n aartappel. Ron hou hom ver van sy lyf af, want hy skop na hom met sy klein knoetsige voetjies; hy gryp hom om die enkels en hou hom kop onderstebo.

"Dis wat jy moet doen," sê hy. Hy lig die kabouter hoog bo sy kop ("Los my!") en swaai hom in 'n sirkel soos 'n lasso. Toe hy die geskokte uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien, sê Ron gou, "Hulle kry nie seer nie –"

maar 'n mens moet hulle dronk maak sodat hulle nie weer hul kabouter-
gate kan kry nie."

Hy los die kabouter se enkels: hy trek 'n stuk of ses meter die lug in
en land met 'n dowwe plofgeluid in die veld aan die oorkant van die hei-
ning.

"Treurig," sê Fred. "Ek wed ek kry myne tot anderkant daardie stomp."

Harry leer gou om nie vir die kabouters jammer te wees nie. Hy besluit
om die eerste een net oor die heining te laat val, maar die kabouter sien
dit vir swakheid aan en sink sy skerp tande diep in Harry se vinger in,
sodat Harry hom boeglam sukkel om hom af te skud, totdat –

"Sjoe, Harry – dis 'n goeie twintig meter . . ."

Kort voor lank is die lug dik van kabouters wat die wêreld vol vlieg.

"Hulle is nie eintlik slim nie," sê George terwyl hy 'n stuk of ses ka-
bouters gelyk gryp. "Sodra hulle agterkom dat iets aan die gang is, kom
hulle uit om te kyk. 'n Mens sou dink hulle sal teen die tyd al van beter
weet."

Aan die ander kant van die heining strompel 'n hele skare kabouters
in 'n verstrooide ry en met geboë skouers oor die veld.

"Hulle sal weer kom," sê Ron terwyl hulle kyk hoe die kabouters in
die heining aan die oorkant van die veld verdwyn. "Hulle is mal oor ons
plek . . . Pa's te sag met hulle, hy dink hulle is oulik . . ."

Net toe klap die voordeur.

"Hy's hier!" sê George. "Pa's tuis!"

Hulle draf deur die tuin en terug na die huis.

Mnr. Weasley sit inmekaar op 'n kombuisstoel met sy bril eenkant en
sy oë toe. Hy is skraal gebou en vinnig besig om bles te word, maar die
paar haartjies wat nog oor is, is net so rooi soos sy kinders s'n. Hy dra 'n
lang groen kleding wat stowwerig en vol kreukels is.

"Wat 'n nag," mompel hy en steek sy hand uit na die teepot terwyl
almal om hom gaan sit. "Nege klopjagte. Nege! I'n ou Mundungus Flet-
cher probeer my sowaar toor toe ek my rug op hom draai . . ."

Mnr. Weasley vat 'n groot sluk tee en sug.

"Iets gekry, Pa?" vra Fred gretig.

"Net 'n paar krimpende sleutels en 'n ketel wat byt," sê mnr. Weasley
en gaap. "Daar was 'n paar werklik onaardige goed wat gelukkig nie my
departement is nie. Mortlake is weggeneem vir ondervraging oor 'n
klompie uiters snaakse wesels, maar dis die Komitee vir Eksperimentele
Towerspele se werk, dank die vader . . ."

"Hoekom al die moeite om sleutels te maak wat krimp?" vra George.

"Net om die Moggels te irriteer," sê mnr. Weasley en sug. "Verkoop 'n
sleutel aan hulle wat heeltemal wegkrimp sodat hulle dit nie kan kry
wanneer hulle dit wil gebruik nie . . . Dis natuurlik baie moeilik om
iemand daarvoor vas te trek, want geen Moggel sal erken dat sy sleutel

aanhoudend krimp nie – hulle hou aan sê dis weg, al krimp die ding ook voor hul oë . . . maar die goed wat ons mense deesdae begogel, dis net ongelooflik –”

“SOOS MOTORS, BYVOORBEELD?”

Mev. Weasley maak haar verskyning met ’n lang stookyster uitgestrek soos ’n swaard in haar hand. Mnr. Weasley se oë vlieg oop. Hy lyk skuldig toe hy na sy vrou staar.

“M-motors, Molly, my skat?”

“Ja, Arthur, motors,” sê mev. Weasley en haar oë blits. “Stel jou voor, nè, ’n towenaar wat ’n ou verroeste kar koop en vir sy vrou sê al wat hy wil doen is om dit uitmekaar te haal en te kyk hoe dit werk, terwyl hy dit eintlik betower het sodat dit kan vlieg.”

Mnr. Weasley knipper sy oë.

“Maar, skat, ek dink jy sal vind dat dit heeltemal wettig is, hoewel dit, h’m, dalk beter sou wees as hy vir sy vrou die waarheid vertel het . . . Daar is ’n skuiwergat in die wet, sien . . . solank hy nie van plan was om inderdaad daarmee te vlieg nie, beteken die feit dat die voertuig wel kan vlieg, nie noodwendig dat –”

“Arthur Weasley, jy het seker gemaak dat daar ’n skuiwergat is toe jy daardie wet geskryf het!” skree mev. Weasley. “Dit net sodat jy kan aanhou peuter met al daardie Moggelkatoeters in die skuur! En vir jou inligting, Harry het vanoggend hier aangekom in die einste motor wat jy nie van plan was om te laat vlieg nie!”

“Harry?” vra mnr. Weasley verbluf. “Harry wie?”

Hy kyk om hom, sien vir Harry en val amper van sy stoel af.

“Grote genade, is dit tog nie Harry Potter nie? Baie bly om jou te ontmoet, Ron praat gedurig oor jou –”

“Jou seuns het laas nag met daardie kar na Harry se huis toe en terug gevlieg!” skree mev. Weasley. “Wat het jy daarop te sê, h’m?”

“Het julle regtig?” vra mnr. Weasley gretig. “Hoe het die kar hom gedra? Ek-ek bedoel,” stotter hy, terwyl die vonke uit mev. Weasley se oë spat, “dit – dit was baie verkeerd van julle, seuns – inderdaad baie verkeerd . . .”

“Kom ons los hulle alleen,” brom Ron vir Harry, terwyl mev. Weasley soos ’n brulpadda opswel. “Kom ek gaan wys jou my kamer.”

Hulle glip uit die kombuis en af met ’n smal gang na ’n lendelam stel trappe wat kruis en dwars boontoe gaan. Op die derde draai is ’n deur wat oopstaan. Harry is net betyds om twee blink bruin oë na hom te sien staar, voor dit vinnig toeklap.

“Ginny,” sê Ron. “Jy’t nie ’n idee hoe vreemd dit vir haar is om so skaam te wees nie, gewoonlik is sy nooit stil nie –”

Hulle klim verby nog twee verdiepings tot by ’n deur waarvan die verf erg afdop en waarop staan: “Ronald se Kamer”.

Harry gaan in; die plafon is skuins en sy kop raak amper daaraan. Hy knipper sy oë. Dis of hy by 'n smeltkroes instap: amper alles in Ron se kamer is 'n skel oranjekleur: die deken, die mure, selfs die plafon. Ron het elke beskikbare sentimeter van die verbleikte muurpapier toegeplak met plakkate van dieselfde sewe hekse en towenaars, almal in helder-oranje geklee, met besems, en hulle staan en waai uitgelate.

“Jou Kwiddieckspan?” vra Harry.

“Die Chudley Cannons,” sê Ron en wys na sy oranje deken wat versier is met twee reuse swart C's en 'n vlieënde kanonkoeël. “Negende in die liga.”

Ron se skooltoorboeke is slordig in 'n hoek van die vertrek opgestapel, langs 'n hoop strokiesprentboeke wat omtrent almal gaan oor *Die Avonture van Martin Miggs, die Mal Moggel*. Ron se towerstaf lê bo-op 'n vis-tenk vol paddaeiers wat op die vensterbank staan, reg langs sy vet grys rot, Skille, wat in 'n sonkol lê en slaap.

Harry tree oor 'n pak Selfskommel-kaarte op die vloer en kyk deur die klein venstertjie. In die veld daar ver onder sien hy hoe die kabouters die een na die ander deur die Weasleys se heining klouter. Toe draai hy na Ron wat lyk of hy hom angstig dophou, asof hy wonder wat Harry gaan sê.

“Dis 'n bietjie klein,” sê Ron vinnig. “Nie soos jou kamer daar by die Moggels nie. En ek is reg onder die monster in die solder, hy kap altyd teen die pype en dan kreun hy . . .”

Maar Harry glimlag breed en sê, “Dis die beste huis waarin ek nog ooit was.”

Ron se ore word pienk.

CHAPTER FOUR



AT FLOURISH AND BLOTTS

Life at the Burrow was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. The Dursleys liked everything neat and ordered; the Weasleys' house burst with the strange and unexpected. Harry got a shock the first time he looked in the mirror over the kitchen mantelpiece and it shouted, "*Tuck your shirt in, scruffy!*" The ghoul in the attic howled and dropped pipes whenever he felt things were getting too quiet, and small explosions from Fred and George's bedroom were considered perfectly normal. What Harry found most unusual about life at Ron's, however, wasn't the talking mirror or the clanking ghoul: It was the fact that everybody there seemed to like him.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over the state of his socks and tried to force him to eat fourth helpings at every meal. Mr. Weasley liked Harry to sit next to him at the dinner table so that he could bombard him with questions about life with Muggles, asking him to explain how things like plugs and the postal service worked.

“Fascinating!” he would say as Harry talked him through using a telephone. *“Ingenious,* really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic.”

Harry heard from Hogwarts one sunny morning about a week after he had arrived at the Burrow. He and Ron went down to breakfast to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny already sitting at the kitchen table. The moment she saw Harry, Ginny accidentally knocked her porridge bowl to the floor with a loud clatter. Ginny seemed very prone to knocking things over whenever Harry entered a room. She dived under the table to retrieve the bowl and emerged with her face glowing like the setting sun. Pretending he hadn't noticed this, Harry sat down and took the toast Mrs. Weasley offered him.

“Letters from school,” said Mr. Weasley, passing Harry and Ron identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink. “Dumbledore already knows you're here, Harry — doesn't miss a trick, that man. You two've got them, too,” he added, as Fred and George ambled in, still in their pajamas.

For a few minutes there was silence as they all read their letters. Harry's told him to catch the Hogwarts Express as usual from King's Cross station on September first. There was also a list of the new books he'd need for the coming year.

SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS WILL REQUIRE:

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2 by Miranda Goshawk

Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy Lockhart

Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart

Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart

Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart

Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart

Year with the Yeti by Gilderoy Lockhart

Fred, who had finished his own list, peered over at Harry's.

"You've been told to get all Lockhart's books, too!" he said. "The new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher must be a fan — bet it's a witch."

At this point, Fred caught his mother's eye and quickly busied himself with the marmalade.

"That lot won't come cheap," said George, with a quick look at his parents. "Lockhart's books are really expensive. . . ."

"Well, we'll manage," said Mrs. Weasley, but she looked worried. "I expect we'll be able to pick up a lot of Ginny's things secondhand."

"Oh, are you starting at Hogwarts this year?" Harry asked Ginny.

She nodded, blushing to the roots of her flaming hair, and put her elbow in the butter dish. Fortunately no one saw this except Harry, because just then Ron's elder brother Percy walked in. He was already dressed, his Hogwarts prefect badge pinned to his sweater vest.

"Morning, all," said Percy briskly. "Lovely day."

He sat down in the only remaining chair but leapt up again almost immediately, pulling from underneath him a molting, gray feather duster — at least, that was what Harry thought it was, until he saw that it was breathing.

“Errol!” said Ron, taking the limp owl from Percy and extracting a letter from under its wing. “*Finally* — he’s got Hermione’s answer. I wrote to her saying we were going to try and rescue you from the Dursleys.”

He carried Errol to a perch just inside the back door and tried to stand him on it, but Errol flopped straight off again so Ron laid him on the draining board instead, muttering, “Pathetic.” Then he ripped open Hermione’s letter and read it out loud:

“*‘Dear Ron, and Harry if you’re there,*

‘I hope everything went all right and that Harry is okay and that you didn’t do anything illegal to get him out, Ron, because that would get Harry into trouble, too. I’ve been really worried and if Harry is all right, will you please let me know at once, but perhaps it would be better if you used a different owl, because I think another delivery might finish your one off.

‘I’m very busy with schoolwork, of course’ — How can she be?” said Ron in horror. “We’re on vacation! — *‘and we’re going to London next Wednesday to buy my new books. Why don’t we meet in Diagon Alley?*

‘Let me know what’s happening as soon as you can. Love from Hermione.’”

“Well, that fits in nicely, we can go and get all your things then, too,” said Mrs. Weasley, starting to clear the table. “What’re you all

up to today?"

Harry, Ron, Fred, and George were planning to go up the hill to a small paddock the Weasleys owned. It was surrounded by trees that blocked it from view of the village below, meaning that they could practice Quidditch there, as long as they didn't fly too high. They couldn't use real Quidditch balls, which would have been hard to explain if they had escaped and flown away over the village; instead they threw apples for one another to catch. They took turns riding Harry's Nimbus Two Thousand, which was easily the best broom; Ron's old Shooting Star was often outstripped by passing butterflies.

Five minutes later they were marching up the hill, broomsticks over their shoulders. They had asked Percy if he wanted to join them, but he had said he was busy. Harry had only seen Percy at mealtimes so far; he stayed shut in his room the rest of the time.

"Wish I knew what he was up to," said Fred, frowning. "He's not himself. His exam results came the day before you did; twelve O.W.L.s and he hardly gloated at all."

"Ordinary Wizarding Levels," George explained, seeing Harry's puzzled look. "Bill got twelve, too. If we're not careful, we'll have another Head Boy in the family. I don't think I could stand the shame."

Bill was the oldest Weasley brother. He and the next brother, Charlie, had already left Hogwarts. Harry had never met either of them, but knew that Charlie was in Romania studying dragons and Bill in Egypt working for the wizards' bank, Gringotts.

"Dunno how Mum and Dad are going to afford all our school stuff this year," said George after a while. "Five sets of Lockhart books!

And Ginny needs robes and a wand and everything. . . .”

Harry said nothing. He felt a bit awkward. Stored in an underground vault at Gringotts in London was a small fortune that his parents had left him. Of course, it was only in the Wizarding world that he had money; you couldn’t use Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts in Muggle shops. He had never mentioned his Gringotts bank account to the Dursleys; he didn’t think their horror of anything connected with magic would stretch to a large pile of gold.

Mrs. Weasley woke them all early the following Wednesday. After a quick half a dozen bacon sandwiches each, they pulled on their coats and Mrs. Weasley took a flowerpot off the kitchen mantelpiece and peered inside.

“We’re running low, Arthur,” she sighed. “We’ll have to buy some more today. . . . Ah well, guests first! After you, Harry dear!”

And she offered him the flowerpot.

Harry stared at them all watching him.

“W-what am I supposed to do?” he stammered.

“He’s never traveled by Floo powder,” said Ron suddenly. “Sorry, Harry, I forgot.”

“Never?” said Mr. Weasley. “But how did you get to Diagon Alley to buy your school things last year?”

“I went on the Underground —”

“Really?” said Mr. Weasley eagerly. “Were there *escapators*? How exactly —”

“Not *now*, Arthur,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Floo powder’s a lot quicker, dear, but goodness me, if you’ve never used it before —”

“He’ll be all right, Mum,” said Fred. “Harry, watch us first.”

He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames.

With a roar, the fire turned emerald green and rose higher than Fred, who stepped right into it, shouted, “Diagon Alley!” and vanished.

“You must speak clearly, dear,” Mrs. Weasley told Harry as George dipped his hand into the flowerpot. “And be sure to get out at the right grate. . . .”

“The right what?” said Harry nervously as the fire roared and whipped George out of sight, too.

“Well, there are an awful lot of wizard fires to choose from, you know, but as long as you’ve spoken clearly —”

“He’ll be fine, Molly, don’t fuss,” said Mr. Weasley, helping himself to Floo powder, too.

“But, dear, if he got lost, how would we ever explain to his aunt and uncle?”

“They wouldn’t mind,” Harry reassured her. “Dudley would think it was a brilliant joke if I got lost up a chimney, don’t worry about that —”

“Well . . . all right . . . you go after Arthur,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Now, when you get into the fire, say where you’re going —”

“And keep your elbows tucked in,” Ron advised.

“And your eyes shut,” said Mrs. Weasley. “The soot —”

“Don’t fidget,” said Ron. “Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace —”

“But don’t panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and

George.”

Trying hard to bear all this in mind, Harry took a pinch of Floo powder and walked to the edge of the fire. He took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames, and stepped forward; the fire felt like a warm breeze; he opened his mouth and immediately swallowed a lot of hot ash.

“D-Dia-gon Alley,” he coughed.

It felt as though he were being sucked down a giant drain. He seemed to be spinning very fast — the roaring in his ears was deafening — he tried to keep his eyes open but the whirl of green flames made him feel sick — something hard knocked his elbow and he tucked it in tightly, still spinning and spinning — now it felt as though cold hands were slapping his face — squinting through his glasses he saw a blurred stream of fireplaces and snatched glimpses of the rooms beyond — his bacon sandwiches were churning inside him — he closed his eyes again wishing it would stop, and then —

He fell, face forward, onto cold stone and felt the bridge of his glasses snap.

Dizzy and bruised, covered in soot, he got gingerly to his feet, holding his broken glasses up to his eyes. He was quite alone, but *where* he was, he had no idea. All he could tell was that he was standing in the stone fireplace of what looked like a large, dimly lit wizard’s shop — but nothing in here was ever likely to be on a Hogwarts school list.

A glass case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a bloodstained pack of cards, and a staring glass eye. Evil-looking masks stared down from the walls, an assortment of human bones lay

upon the counter, and rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Even worse, the dark, narrow street Harry could see through the dusty shop window was definitely not Diagon Alley.

The sooner he got out of here, the better. Nose still stinging where it had hit the hearth, Harry made his way swiftly and silently toward the door, but before he'd got halfway toward it, two people appeared on the other side of the glass — and one of them was the very last person Harry wanted to meet when he was lost, covered in soot, and wearing broken glasses: Draco Malfoy.

Harry looked quickly around and spotted a large black cabinet to his left; he shot inside it and pulled the doors closed, leaving a small crack to peer through. Seconds later, a bell clanged, and Malfoy stepped into the shop.

The man who followed could only be Draco's father. He had the same pale, pointed face and identical cold, gray eyes. Mr. Malfoy crossed the shop, looking lazily at the items on display, and rang a bell on the counter before turning to his son and saying, "Touch nothing, Draco."

Malfoy, who had reached for the glass eye, said, "I thought you were going to buy me a present."

"I said I would buy you a racing broom," said his father, drumming his fingers on the counter.

"What's the good of that if I'm not on the House team?" said Malfoy, looking sulky and bad-tempered. "Harry Potter got a Nimbus Two Thousand last year. Special permission from Dumbledore so he could play for Gryffindor. He's not even that good, it's just because he's *famous* . . . famous for having a stupid *scar* on his forehead. . . ."

Malfoy bent down to examine a shelf full of skulls.

“... everyone thinks he’s so *smart*, wonderful *Potter* with his *scar* and his *broomstick* —”

“You have told me this at least a dozen times already,” said Mr. Malfoy, with a quelling look at his son. “And I would remind you that it is not — prudent — to appear less than fond of Harry Potter, not when most of our kind regard him as the hero who made the Dark Lord disappear — ah, Mr. Borgin.”

A stooping man had appeared behind the counter, smoothing his greasy hair back from his face.

“Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again,” said Mr. Borgin in a voice as oily as his hair. “Delighted — and young Master Malfoy, too — charmed. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced —”

“I’m not buying today, Mr. Borgin, but selling,” said Mr. Malfoy.

“Selling?” The smile faded slightly from Mr. Borgin’s face.

“You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids,” said Mr. Malfoy, taking a roll of parchment from his inside pocket and unraveling it for Mr. Borgin to read. “I have a few — ah — items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call. . . .”

Mr. Borgin fixed a pair of pince-nez to his nose and looked down the list.

“The Ministry wouldn’t presume to trouble you, sir, surely?”

Mr. Malfoy’s lip curled.

“I have not been visited yet. The name Malfoy still commands a certain respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There

are rumors about a new Muggle Protection Act — no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it —”

Harry felt a hot surge of anger.

“— and as you see, certain of these poisons might make it *appear* —”

“I understand, sir, of course,” said Mr. Borgin. “Let me see . . .”

“Can I have *that*?” interrupted Draco, pointing at the withered hand on its cushion.

“Ah, the Hand of Glory!” said Mr. Borgin, abandoning Mr. Malfoy’s list and scurrying over to Draco. “Insert a candle and it gives light only to the holder! Best friend of thieves and plunderers! Your son has fine taste, sir.”

“I hope my son will amount to more than a thief or a plunderer, Borgin,” said Mr. Malfoy coldly, and Mr. Borgin said quickly, “No offense, sir, no offense meant —”

“Though if his grades don’t pick up,” said Mr. Malfoy, more coldly still, “that may indeed be all he is fit for —”

“It’s not my fault,” retorted Draco. “The teachers all have favorites, that Hermione Granger —”

“I would have thought you’d be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam,” snapped Mr. Malfoy.

“Ha!” said Harry under his breath, pleased to see Draco looking both abashed and angry.

“It’s the same all over,” said Mr. Borgin, in his oily voice. “Wizard blood is counting for less everywhere —”

“Not with me,” said Mr. Malfoy, his long nostrils flaring.

“No, sir, nor with me, sir,” said Mr. Borgin, with a deep bow.

“In that case, perhaps we can return to my list,” said Mr. Malfoy shortly. “I am in something of a hurry, Borgin, I have important business elsewhere today —”

They started to haggle. Harry watched nervously as Draco drew nearer and nearer to his hiding place, examining the objects for sale. Draco paused to examine a long coil of hangman’s rope and to read, smirking, the card propped on a magnificent necklace of opals, *Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed — Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date.*

Draco turned away and saw the cabinet right in front of him. He walked forward — he stretched out his hand for the handle —

“Done,” said Mr. Malfoy at the counter. “Come, Draco —”

Harry wiped his forehead on his sleeve as Draco turned away.

“Good day to you, Mr. Borgin. I’ll expect you at the manor tomorrow to pick up the goods.”

The moment the door had closed, Mr. Borgin dropped his oily manner.

“Good day yourself, *Mister* Malfoy, and if the stories are true, you haven’t sold me half of what’s hidden in your *manor*. . . .”

Muttering darkly, Mr. Borgin disappeared into a back room. Harry waited for a minute in case he came back, then, quietly as he could, slipped out of the cabinet, past the glass cases, and out of the shop door.

Clutching his broken glasses to his face, Harry stared around. He had emerged into a dingy alleyway that seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts. The one he’d just left, Borgin and Burkes, looked like the largest, but opposite was a nasty

window display of shrunken heads and, two doors down, a large cage was alive with gigantic black spiders. Two shabby-looking wizards were watching him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each other. Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his glasses on straight and hoping against hope he'd be able to find a way out of here.

An old wooden street sign hanging over a shop selling poisonous candles told him he was in Knockturn Alley. This didn't help, as Harry had never heard of such a place. He supposed he hadn't spoken clearly enough through his mouthful of ashes back in the Weasleys' fire. Trying to stay calm, he wondered what to do.

"Not lost are you, my dear?" said a voice in his ear, making him jump.

An aged witch stood in front of him, holding a tray of what looked horribly like whole human fingernails. She leered at him, showing mossy teeth. Harry backed away.

"I'm fine, thanks," he said. "I'm just —"

"HARRY! What d'yeh think yer doin' down there?"

Harry's heart leapt. So did the witch; a load of fingernails cascaded down over her feet and she cursed as the massive form of Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, came striding toward them, beetle-black eyes flashing over his great bristling beard.

"Hagrid!" Harry croaked in relief. "I was lost — Floo powder —"

Hagrid seized Harry by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away from the witch, knocking the tray right out of her hands. Her shrieks followed them all the way along the twisting alleyway out into bright

sunlight. Harry saw a familiar, snow-white marble building in the distance — Gringotts Bank. Hagrid had steered him right into Diagon Alley.

“Yer a mess!” said Hagrid gruffly, brushing soot off Harry so forcefully he nearly knocked him into a barrel of dragon dung outside an apothecary. “Skulkin’ around Knockturn Alley, I dunno — dodgy place, Harry — don’ want no one ter see yeh down there —”

“I realized *that*,” said Harry, ducking as Hagrid made to brush him off again. “I told you, I was lost — what were you doing down there, anyway?”

“I was lookin’ fer a Flesh-Eatin’ Slug Repellent,” growled Hagrid. “They’re ruinin’ the school cabbages. Yer not on yer own?”

“I’m staying with the Weasleys but we got separated,” Harry explained. “I’ve got to go and find them. . . .”

They set off together down the street.

“How come yeh never wrote back ter me?” said Hagrid as Harry jogged alongside him (he had to take three steps to every stride of Hagrid’s enormous boots). Harry explained all about Dobby and the Dursleys.

“Lousy Muggles,” growled Hagrid. “If I’d’ve known —”

“Harry! Harry! Over here!”

Harry looked up and saw Hermione Granger standing at the top of the white flight of steps to Gringotts. She ran down to meet them, her bushy brown hair flying behind her.

“What happened to your glasses? Hello, Hagrid — Oh, it’s *wonderful* to see you two again — Are you coming into Gringotts, Harry?”

“As soon as I’ve found the Weasleys,” said Harry.

“Yeh won’t have long ter wait,” Hagrid said with a grin.

Harry and Hermione looked around: Sprinting up the crowded street were Ron, Fred, George, Percy, and Mr. Weasley.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley panted. “We *hoped* you’d only gone one grate too far. . . .” He mopped his glistening bald patch. “Molly’s frantic — she’s coming now —”

“Where did you come out?” Ron asked.

“Knockturn Alley,” said Hagrid grimly.

“*Excellent!*” said Fred and George together.

“We’ve never been allowed in,” said Ron enviously.

“I should ruddy well think not,” growled Hagrid.

Mrs. Weasley now came galloping into view, her handbag swinging wildly in one hand, Ginny just clinging onto the other.

“Oh, Harry — oh, my dear — you could have been anywhere —”

Gasping for breath, she pulled a large clothes brush out of her bag and began sweeping off the soot Hagrid hadn’t managed to beat away. Mr. Weasley took Harry’s glasses, gave them a tap of his wand, and returned them, good as new.

“Well, gotta be off,” said Hagrid, who was having his hand wrung by Mrs. Weasley (“Knockturn Alley! If you hadn’t found him, Hagrid!”). “See yer at Hogwarts!” And he strode away, head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the packed street.

“Guess who I saw in Borgin and Burkes?” Harry asked Ron and Hermione as they climbed the Gringotts steps. “Malfoy and his father.”

“Did Lucius Malfoy buy anything?” said Mr. Weasley sharply behind them.

“No, he was selling —”

“So he’s worried,” said Mr. Weasley with grim satisfaction. “Oh, I’d love to get Lucius Malfoy for something. . . .”

“You be careful, Arthur,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply as they were bowed into the bank by a goblin at the door. “That family’s trouble. Don’t go biting off more than you can chew —”

“So you don’t think I’m a match for Lucius Malfoy?” said Mr. Weasley indignantly, but he was distracted almost at once by the sight of Hermione’s parents, who were standing nervously at the counter that ran all along the great marble hall, waiting for Hermione to introduce them.

“But you’re *Muggles*!” said Mr. Weasley delightedly. “We must have a drink! What’s that you’ve got there? Oh, you’re changing Muggle money. Molly, look!” He pointed excitedly at the ten-pound notes in Mr. Granger’s hand.

“Meet you back here,” Ron said to Hermione as the Weasleys and Harry were led off to their underground vaults by another Gringotts goblin.

The vaults were reached by means of small, goblin-driven carts that sped along miniature train tracks through the bank’s underground tunnels. Harry enjoyed the breakneck journey down to the Weasleys’ vault, but felt dreadful, far worse than he had in Knockturn Alley, when it was opened. There was a very small pile of silver Sickles inside, and just one gold Galleon. Mrs. Weasley felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into her bag. Harry felt even

worse when they reached his vault. He tried to block the contents from view as he hastily shoved handfuls of coins into a leather bag.

Back outside on the marble steps, they all separated. Percy muttered vaguely about needing a new quill. Fred and George had spotted their friend from Hogwarts, Lee Jordan. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were going to a secondhand robe shop. Mr. Weasley was insisting on taking the Grangers off to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink.

“We’ll all meet at Flourish and Blotts in an hour to buy your schoolbooks,” said Mrs. Weasley, setting off with Ginny. “And not one step down Knockturn Alley!” she shouted at the twins’ retreating backs.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione strolled off along the winding, cobbled street. The bag of gold, silver, and bronze jangling cheerfully in Harry’s pocket was clamoring to be spent, so he bought three large strawberry-and-peanut-butter ice creams, which they slurped happily as they wandered up the alley, examining the fascinating shop windows. Ron gazed longingly at a full set of Chudley Cannon robes in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies until Hermione dragged them off to buy ink and parchment next door. In Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who were stocking up on Dr. Filibuster’s Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks, and in a tiny junk shop full of broken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small and deeply boring book called *Prefects Who Gained Power*.

“*A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers,*” Ron read aloud off the back cover. “That sounds *fascinating*. . . .”

“Go away,” Percy snapped.

“Course, he’s very ambitious, Percy, he’s got it all planned out. . . . He wants to be Minister of Magic . . .” Ron told Harry and Hermione in an undertone as they left Percy to it.

An hour later, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

GILDEROY LOCKHART
will be signing copies of his autobiography
MAGICAL ME
today 12:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

“We can actually meet him!” Hermione squealed. “I mean, he’s written almost the whole booklist!”

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of witches around Mrs. Weasley’s age. A harassed-looking wizard stood at the door, saying, “Calmly, please, ladies. . . . Don’t push, there . . . mind the books, now. . . .”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed inside. A long line wound right to the back of the shop, where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books. They each grabbed a copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* and sneaked up the line to where the rest of the Weasleys were standing with Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

“Oh, there you are, good,” said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded

breathless and kept patting her hair. “We’ll be able to see him in a minute. . . .”

Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing dazzlingly white teeth at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard’s hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

A short, irritable-looking man was dancing around taking photographs with a large black camera that emitted puffs of purple smoke with every blinding flash.

“Out of the way, there,” he snarled at Ron, moving back to get a better shot. “This is for the *Daily Prophet* —”

“Big deal,” said Ron, rubbing his foot where the photographer had stepped on it.

Gilderoy Lockhart heard him. He looked up. He saw Ron — and then he saw Harry. He stared. Then he leapt to his feet and positively shouted, “It *can’t* be Harry Potter?”

The crowd parted, whispering excitedly; Lockhart dived forward, seized Harry’s arm, and pulled him to the front. The crowd burst into applause. Harry’s face burned as Lockhart shook his hand for the photographer, who was clicking away madly, wafting thick smoke over the Weasleys.

“Nice big smile, Harry,” said Lockhart, through his own gleaming teeth. “Together, you and I are worth the front page.”

When he finally let go of Harry’s hand, Harry could hardly feel his fingers. He tried to sidle back over to the Weasleys, but Lockhart threw an arm around his shoulders and clamped him tightly to his

side.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said loudly, waving for quiet. “What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I’ve been sitting on for some time!

“When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography — which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge —” The crowd applauded again. “He had *no idea*,” Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to the end of his nose, “that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, *Magical Me*. He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

The crowd cheered and clapped and Harry found himself being presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart. Staggering slightly under their weight, he managed to make his way out of the limelight to the edge of the room, where Ginny was standing next to her new cauldron.

“You have these,” Harry mumbled to her, tipping the books into the cauldron. “I’ll buy my own —”

“Bet you loved that, didn’t you, Potter?” said a voice Harry had no trouble recognizing. He straightened up and found himself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy, who was wearing his usual sneer.

“*Famous* Harry Potter,” said Malfoy. “Can’t even go into a *bookshop* without making the front page.”

“Leave him alone, he didn’t want all that!” said Ginny. It was the

first time she had spoken in front of Harry. She was glaring at Malfoy.

“Potter, you’ve got yourself a *girlfriend!*” drawled Malfoy. Ginny went scarlet as Ron and Hermione fought their way over, both clutching stacks of Lockhart’s books.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Ron, looking at Malfoy as if he were something unpleasant on the sole of his shoe. “Bet you’re surprised to see Harry here, eh?”

“Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley,” retorted Malfoy. “I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for all those.”

Ron went as red as Ginny. He dropped his books into the cauldron, too, and started toward Malfoy, but Harry and Hermione grabbed the back of his jacket.

“Ron!” said Mr. Weasley, struggling over with Fred and George. “What are you doing? It’s too crowded in here, let’s go outside.”

“Well, well, well — Arthur Weasley.”

It was Mr. Malfoy. He stood with his hand on Draco’s shoulder, sneering in just the same way.

“Lucius,” said Mr. Weasley, nodding coldly.

“Busy time at the Ministry, I hear,” said Mr. Malfoy. “All those raids . . . I hope they’re paying you overtime?”

He reached into Ginny’s cauldron and extracted, from amid the glossy Lockhart books, a very old, very battered copy of *A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration*.

“Obviously not,” Mr. Malfoy said. “Dear me, what’s the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don’t even pay you

well for it?”

Mr. Weasley flushed darker than either Ron or Ginny.

“We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy,” he said.

“Clearly,” said Mr. Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who were watching apprehensively. “The company you keep, Weasley . . . and I thought your family could sink no lower —”

There was a thud of metal as Ginny’s cauldron went flying; Mr. Weasley had thrown himself at Mr. Malfoy, knocking him backward into a bookshelf. Dozens of heavy spellbooks came thundering down on all their heads; there was a yell of, “Get him, Dad!” from Fred or George; Mrs. Weasley was shrieking, “No, Arthur, no!”; the crowd stampeded backward, knocking more shelves over; “Gentlemen, please — please!” cried the assistant, and then, louder than all —

“Break it up, there, gents, break it up —”

Hagrid was wading toward them through the sea of books. In an instant he had pulled Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy apart. Mr. Weasley had a cut lip and Mr. Malfoy had been hit in the eye by an *Encyclopedia of Toadstools*. He was still holding Ginny’s old Transfiguration book. He thrust it at her, his eyes glittering with malice.

“Here, girl — take your book — it’s the best your father can give you —” Pulling himself out of Hagrid’s grip he beckoned to Draco and swept from the shop.

“Yeh should’ve ignored him, Arthur,” said Hagrid, almost lifting Mr. Weasley off his feet as he straightened his robes. “Rotten ter the core, the whole family, everyone knows that — no Malfoy’s worth

listenin' ter — bad blood, that's what it is — come on now — let's get outta here."

The assistant looked as though he wanted to stop them leaving, but he barely came up to Hagrid's waist and seemed to think better of it. They hurried up the street, the Grangers shaking with fright and Mrs. Weasley beside herself with fury.

"A *fine* example to set for your children . . . *brawling* in public . . . *what* Gilderoy Lockhart must've thought —"

"He was pleased," said Fred. "Didn't you hear him as we were leaving? He was asking that bloke from the *Daily Prophet* if he'd be able to work the fight into his report — said it was all publicity —"

But it was a subdued group that headed back to the fireside in the Leaky Cauldron, where Harry, the Weasleys, and all their shopping would be traveling back to the Burrow using Floo powder. They said good-bye to the Grangers, who were leaving the pub for the Muggle street on the other side; Mr. Weasley started to ask them how bus stops worked, but stopped quickly at the look on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry took off his glasses and put them safely in his pocket before helping himself to Floo powder. It definitely wasn't his favorite way to travel.

By Sierskrif en Klatt

By Die Konynenes word dinge heeltemal anders gedoen as by Ligusterlaan. Die Dursleys hou daarvan dat alles netjies en presies moet wees; die Weasleys se huis is stormagtig, met vreemde en onverwagte dinge. Harry skrik toe hy die eerste keer in die spieël bo die kaggelrak in die kombuis kyk, en dit vir hom skree, “Steek in jou hemp, slorrie!” Die monster in die solder kerm en gooi pype rond wanneer dinge te stil na sy sin is, en ligte ontploffinkies uit Fred en George se kamer word as heel normaal beskou. Vir Harry is die mees ongewone ding in Ron-hulle se huis nie die pratende spieël of die klaterende monster nie, maar die feit dat dit lyk of almal van hom hou.

Mev. Weasley slaan haar hande saam oor die toestand van sy sokkies en probeer hom dwing om by elke maaltyd vier porsies van alles te eet. Mnr. Weasley hou daarvan dat Harry aan tafel langs hom sit. Hy bombardeer hom met vrae oor die lewe saam met Moggels en laat hom verduidelik hoe goed soos kragproppe en die poswese inmekaarsteek.

“Ongelooflik!” sal hy sê, terwyl Harry hom vertel presies hoe ’n telefoon werk. “Werklik vernuftig, die metodes wat die Moggels uitdink om sonder toorkrag klaar te kom.”

Een sonnige oggend, omtrent ’n week na sy aankoms by Die Konynenes, hoor Harry van Hogwarts. Hy en Ron gaan af vir ontbyt en kry mnr. en mev. Weasley en Ginny klaar aan tafel in die kombuis. Die oomblik toe sy vir Harry sien, klap Ginny per ongeluk haar papbord kletterend van die tafel af. Dit lyk of Ginny gedurig ongelukke oorkom as Harry in die rondte is. Sy duik onder die tafel in om haar bakkie op te tel en kom uit met ’n gesig so rooi soos die ondergaande son. Harry maak of niks gebeur het nie. Hy gaan sit en neem die roosterbrood wat mev. Weasley vir hom aanbied.

“Briewe van die skool af,” sê mnr. Weasley en gee vir Harry en Ron identiese koeverte van geel perkament waarop hul name en adresse in groen ink staan. “Dompeldorius weet reeds dat jy hier is, Harry – daardie man mis niks. Hier’s julle s’n ook,” sê hy vir Fred en George wat net toe inkom, nog steeds in hul pajamas.

Vir 'n paar minute is dit stil terwyl hulle hul briewe lees. Harry s'n sê dat hy die Hogwarts Express soos tevore op die eerste September by King's Cross-stasie moet haal. Daar is ook 'n lys van al die nuwe boeke wat hy vir die komende jaar moet hê.

Tweedejaarstudente benodig die volgende:

Die Standaardhandleiding vir Goëlery, Graad 2 deur Miranda Singvalk

Dans met die Doodsbode deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Manewales met Monsters deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Huppel met Hekse deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Toer met Trolle deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Op Vakansie met Vampiere deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Wandel met Weerwolwe deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Die Jaar van die Jeti deur Gilderoy Lockhart

Fred, wat so pas sy eie lys klaar gelees het, loer na Harry s'n.

“Julle moet ook al Lockhart se boeke kry!” sê hy. “Die nuwe Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser moet 'n bewonderaar wees – wed dis 'n heks.”

Met dié vang Fred sy ma se oog en hy hou homself skielik vreeslik besig met die marmelade.

“Dit gaan 'n klomp geld kos,” sê George en loer vinnig na sy ouers. “Lockhart se boeke is regtig nie goedkoop nie . . .”

“Ag, ons sal regkom,” sê mev. Weasley, maar sy lyk bekommerd. “Ons sal darem seker die meeste van Ginny se goed tweedehands kan kry.”

“O, is jy ook volgende jaar op Hogwarts?” vra Harry vir Ginny.

Sy knik en bloos tot aan die wortels van haar bos vlamme hare en druk 'n elmboog in die botterbak. Gelukkig sien niemand behalwe Harry dit nie, want net toe kom Percy, Ron se ouer broer, ook in. Hy is reeds aangetrek en het sy Hogwartsprefekwapentjie aan sy gebreide moulose trui vasgesteek.

“Goeiemôre, mense,” sê Percy opgewek. “Wat 'n lieflike dag!”

Hy gaan sit op die enigste oorblywende stoel, maar spring amper onmiddellik weer op en haal 'n verinnuweerde grys verestoffer onder hom uit – ten minste, dis hoe dit vir Harry lyk, tot hy sien dat dit asemhaal.

“Errol!” sê Ron en vat die slap uil by Percy en haal 'n brief onder sy vlerk uit. “*Uiteindelik* – hy het Hermien se antwoord. Ek het vir haar geskryf om te sê dat ons jou van die Dursleys gaan probeer red.”

Hy dra vir Errol na 'n dwarsstok net duskant die agterdeur en probeer om hom daarop te laat sit, maar Errol val dadelik weer om, dus sit Ron hom op die drupblad langs die wasbak neer terwyl hy onderlangs “Pate-ties” mompel. Toe skeur hy Hermien se brief oop en lees dit hardop voor:

Liewe Ron en Harry, as jy daar is,

Ek hoop alles het goed afgeloop en dat Harry oukei is en dat julle niks onwettigs gedoen het nie, Ron, want dan kan Harry ook in die moeilikheid kom. Ek is regtig baie bekommerd en julle moet my dadelik laat weet hoe dit met Harry gaan, maar dalk is dit beter as julle 'n ander uil gebruik, want ek dink daardie een sal dit nie maak as hy nog 'n brief moet aflewer nie.

Ek is natuurlik baie besig met al die skoolwerk – “Hoe kan sy?” sê Ron, duidelik vervul met afgryse, “Dis vakansie!” – en ons gaan volgende Woensdag Londen toe om my nuwe boeke te koop. Hoekom kry ons mekaar nie in Diagonaalstraat nie?

Laat weet my wat aangaan so gou as julle kan, liefde van Hermien.

“Wel, dit werk nou mooi uit; ons kan julle goed ook dan gaan kry,” sê mev. Weasley, terwyl sy die tafel begin opruim. “Wat gaan julle vandag alles doen?”

Harry, Ron, Fred en George is van plan om die heuwel uit te klim na 'n kleinerige kamp wat die Weasleys se eiendom is. Dit is omring deur bome sodat dit nie van die dorp af gesien kan word nie en mits hulle nie te hoog vlieg nie, kan hulle daar Kwiddiek speel.

Hulle gebruik natuurlik nie regte Kwiddiekballe nie, want dit sal moeilik wees om te verduidelik wat aangaan as hulle sou ontsnap en oor die dorp vlieg; pleks daarvan gooi hulle appels vir mekaar. Hulle neem beurte om op Harry se Nimbus Tweeduisend te vlieg, wat verreweg die beste besem is; tot die skoenlappers haal Ron se ou Shooting Star in.

Vyf minute later marsjeer hulle op teen die heuwel met hul besems oor hul skouers. Hulle het vir Percy gevra om saam te kom, maar volgens hom is hy te besig. Tot dusver het Harry vir Percy nog net aan tafel gesien; hy's die hele tyd in sy kamer agter 'n toe deur.

“Wens ek weet wat hy doen,” sê Fred en frons. “Hy's glad nie sy ou self nie. Sy eksamenuitslae het die dag voor jou aangekom; twaalf U.I.L.e en hy't skaars daaroor gespog.”

“Uitsonderlike Intellektuele Liga,” verduidelik George toe hy die verwonderde uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien. “Bill het ook twaalf gehad. Ons moet lig loop of ons het nog 'n hoofseun in die familie. Ek dink nie ek sal die skande oorleef nie.”

Bill is die oudste Weasley-broer. Hy en Charlie, wat net jonger as hy is, het reeds klaargemaak op Hogwarts. Harry het hulle nog nie ontmoet nie, maar hy weet dat Charlie drake in Roemenië bestudeer en dat Bill in Egipte vir die towenaarsbank, Edelgolt, werk.

“Weet nie hoe Ma en Pa hierdie jaar al ons goed sal kan koop nie,” sê George na 'n rukkjie. “Vyf stelle van Lockhart se boeke! En Ginny moet 'n kleed en 'n towerstaf en alles kry . . .”

Harry sê niks. Hy voel 'n bietjie ongemaklik. Diep onder Londen in Edulgolt se ondergrondse kluis is 'n klein fortuin wat sy ouers vir hom nagelaat het. Dit is natuurlik net in die towerwêreld dat hy geld het; jy kan nie Galjoene en Sekels en Knoete in Moggelwinkels gebruik nie. Hy het die Dursleys nog nooit van hierdie Edulgolt-bankrekening vertel nie; hy is seker hul afkeer van die towerwêreld sal nie 'n stapel goud insluit nie.

Vroeg die volgende Woensdag maak mev. Weasley hulle almal wakker. Na 'n hele paar hambroodjies vir elkeen, trek hulle hul jasse aan en mev. Weasley haal 'n blompot van die kaggelrak in die kombuis af en loer daarin.

“Amper op, Arthur,” sê sy met 'n sug. “Sal vandag meer moet koop . . . nou ja, gaste eerste! Kom, Harry!”

Sy hou die blompot voor hom.

Harry staar haar aan.

“W-wat moet ek nou eintlik doen?” stamel hy.

“Hy't nog nooit met Floopoeier gereis nie,” sê Ron skielik. “Jammer, Harry, ek het skoon vergeet.”

“Nog nooit?” sê mnr. Weasley. “Hoe het jy dan verlede jaar by Diagonaalstraat gekom om jou skoolgoed te koop?”

“Met die moltrein –”

“Regtig?” sê mnr. Weasley gretig. “Was daar roltrappe? Presies hoe –”

“Nie nou nie, Arthur,” sê mev. Weasley. “Floopoeier is baie vinniger, kind, maar my goeiste, as jy dit nog nooit gebruik het nie –”

“Hy sal dit regkry, Ma,” sê Fred. “Harry, kyk eers wat ons doen.”

Hy neem 'n knippie van die glinsterende poeier uit die blompot, stap na die vuur toe en gooi die poeier in die vlamme.

Die vuur vlam op en word 'n smaraggroen kleur, hoër as Fred, wat in die vlamme stap en uitroep, “Diagonaalstraat!” voor hy verdwyn.

“Jy moet mooi duidelik praat, kind,” sê mev. Weasley vir Harry toe George sy hand in die blompot steek. “En maak seker dat jy by die regte vuurherd uitklim . . .”

“Die regte wat – ?” vra Harry verbouereerd toe die vuur brul en ook vir George wegwarrel.

“Daar is verskriklik baie towenaarvure om van te kies, weet jy, maar as jy mooi duidelik praat –”

“Hy sal doodreg wees, Molly, moenie aanhou lol nie,” sê mnr. Weasley, terwyl ook hy 'n knippie Floopoeier neem.

“Maar skat, as hy sou wegraak, wat sê ons vir sy oom en tante?”

“Hulle sal nie omgee nie,” verseker Harry haar. “Dudley sal dink dis 'n groot grap as ek in 'n skoorsteen moet wegraak, moet dus nie bekommerd wees nie.”

“Wel . . . goed dan . . . gaan jy na die oom,” sê mev. Weasley. “Onthou net, sodra jy in die vuur klim, moet jy sê waarheen jy wil gaan –”

“En hou jou arms teen jou lyf,” gee Ron raad.

“En maak jou oë toe,” sê mev. Weasley. “Die roet –”

“Moenie vroetel nie,” sê Ron. “Jy kan by die verkeerde vuurherd uitval –”

“En moet ook nie angstig raak en te vroeg uitklim nie, wag tot jy vir Fred en George sien.”

Harry doen sy bes om alles te onthou toe hy die knippie Floopoeier neem en na die vuur stap. Hy haal diep asem, sprinkel die poeier in die vlamme en loop in; die vuur voel soos ’n warm briesie, hy maak sy mond oop en kry ’n mond vol warm as.

“D-Diagonaalstraat,” hoes hy.

Dit voel of hy deur ’n reusebuis gesuig word. Dis of hy om en om tol . . . die gebrul in sy ore is oorverdowend . . . hy probeer sy oë oopmaak, maar die gewarrel van groen vlamme maak hom naar . . . iets hards kap teen sy elmboog en hy hou sy arms styf teen sy sye, hy spin nog steeds om en om . . . nou voel dit asof koue hande hom deur die gesig klap . . . hy loer skeeloog deur sy bril en sien hoe ’n vaal streep vuurherde verbyflits en kry ’n glimp van die vertrekke daaragter . . . sy hambroodjies draai in sy maag . . . Hy maak sy oë weer toe en wens dit wil ophou – en toe val hy, gesig eerste, op koue klippe en hy voel hoe sy brilglase aan skerwe spat.

Dronkerig en vol roet steier hy orent en hou sy stukkende bril voor sy oë. Hy is heeltemal alleen en hy het nie ’n idee *waar* hy is nie. Al wat hy weet, is dat hy in ’n klipvuurherd staan in wat na ’n groot en swak verligte towenaarwinkel lyk – maar *hier* is niks wat ooit op ’n Hogwarts-lys sal verskyn nie.

In ’n glaskas daar naby, op ’n kussing, lê ’n verkrimpte hand, ’n bloed-bevlekte pak kaart en ’n starende glasoo. Boosaardige maskers gluur van die mure af, op die toonbank lê ’n verskeidenheid menslike beendere en van die plafon hang geroeste instrumente vol skerp stekels. Erger, die smal, donker gangetjie wat Harry deur die stowwerige winkelveenster kan sien, is baie beslis nie Diagonaalstraat nie.

Hoe gouer hy hier uitkom, hoe beter, dink hy. Sy neus is nog seer van die val in die vuurherd maar hy glip na die deur, so vinnig en so geluidloos as wat hy maar kan, maar voor hy halfpad is, verskyn twee mense aan die ander kant van die glas – en een van hulle is die allerlaaste persoon wat Harry wil sien as hy verdwaal het en vol roet is en ’n gebreekte bril het: Draco Malfoy.

Harry loer vinnig rond en sien ’n groot swart kas aan sy linkerkant. Soos blits is hy binne-in en is die deure toegetrek; hy los net ’n skrefie om deur te loer. Oomblikke later lui die klok en Malfoy stap in.

Die man by hom kan net sy pa wees. Hy het dieselfde bleek, spits gesig

en koue grys oë. Mnr. Malfoy stap deur die winkel en kyk luiweg na die items wat uitgestal is. Hy lui 'n klokkie op die toonbank voor hy na sy seun draai en sê, "Moet aan niks raak nie, Draco."

Malfoy, wat sy hand na die glasoog uitgesteek het, sê, "Ek dag jy gaan vir my 'n present koop."

"Ek het gesê ek sal vir jou 'n resiesbesem koop," sê sy pa en trommel met sy vingers op die toonbank.

"Wat help dit as ek nie in die huisspan is nie?" Malfoy lyk dikbek en omgekrap. "Harry Potter het verlede jaar 'n Nimbus Tweeduisend gekry. En spesiale toestemming van Dompeldorius sodat hy vir Griffindor kan speel. Hy's nie eens so goed nie, dis net oor hy *beroemd* is . . . beroemd omdat hy 'n simpele *litteken* op sy voorkop het . . ."

Malfoy buk en kyk na 'n versameling skedels eenkant op 'n rak.

". . . almal dink hy's hierdie *wonderlike* Potter met sy ou *litteken* en sy ou *besemstok* en –"

"Jy het dit al ten minste 'n dosyn keer gesê," sê mnr. Malfoy en kyk kwaai na sy seun, "en ek moet jou herinner dat dit nie – *raadsaam* is – om te lyk of jy nie van Harry Potter hou nie, veral nie wanneer die meeste van ons mense hom as die held beskou wat die Donker Heer laat verdwyn – aha, mnr. Borgin."

'n Geboë man het agter die toonbank verskyn. Hy stryk sy olierige hare plat teen sy kop.

"Mnr. Malfoy, wat 'n voorreg om u weer te sien," sê mnr. Borgin in 'n stem wat net so olierig soos sy hare is. "'n Plesier – en die jonheer ook – aangenaam. Hoe kan ek van hulp wees? Ek moet u iets wys, pas ingekom, baie billike prys –"

"Vandag koop ek nie, Borgin, ek verkoop," sê mnr. Malfoy.

"Verkoop?" Die glimlag op mnr. Borgin se gesig vervaag so ietwat.

"Jy het natuurlik gehoor dat die Ministerie nog etlike klopjagte beplan," sê mnr. Malfoy en haal 'n rol perkament uit sy binnesak en vou dit oop, sodat mnr. Borgin dit kan lees. "Ek het 'n paar – h'm – items by die huis wat 'n bron van verleentheid kan wees indien die Ministerie dalk my plek sou aandoen . . ."

Mnr. Borgin hou 'n oogglas voor sy neus en bekyk die lys.

"Die Ministerie sal u darem seker nie lastig val nie, meneer?" sê hy.

Mnr. Malfoy se lip krul.

"Tot op datum is ek nog nie besoek nie. Die naam Malfoy het nog 'n sekere mate van invloed, maar die Ministerie raak al hoe meer bemoeisiek. Daar is gerugte van 'n nuwe Wet op die Beskerming van Moggels – vir seker die werk van daardie motgevrete ou gek, Arthur Weasley –"

Harry voel hoe die woede soos 'n warm golf in hom opstoot.

"– en soos ek dit sien, kan sekere van hierdie gilstowwe die *indruk* skep dat –"

“Ek verstaan, meneer, natuurlik verstaan ek,” sê mnr. Borgin. “Nou laat ek sien . . .”

“Kan ek dit kry?” val Draco hulle in die rede en wys na die verkrimpte hand op die kussing.

“Alha, die Hand van Glorie!” sê mnr. Borgin en los mnr. Malfoy se lys net daar en draf na Draco toe. “Steek ’n kers daarin en dit gee slegs aan die houer lig! Die beste vriend van rowers en plundersaars! U seun het uitstekende smaak, meneer.”

“Ek hoop my seun sal *meer* wees as ’n blote rower of plundersaar, Borgin,” sê mnr. Malfoy so koud dat mnr. Borgin haastig antwoord, “Nie bedoel om aanstoot te gee nie, mnr. Malfoy, glad nie so bedoel nie —”

“Hoewel, as sy punte nie verbeter nie,” sê mnr. Malfoy nog kouer, “is dit dalk al waarvoor hy sal deug.”

“Dis nie my skuld nie,” kap Draco teen. “Die onderwysers het almal witbroodjies, daardie Hermien la Grange —”

“Ek sou dink dat jy jou sal doodskaam as ’n meisie uit ’n Moggel-familie jou in elke eksamen klop,” jak mnr. Malfoy hom af.

“Ha!” sê Harry onderlangs en kry lekker by die aanskoue van Draco, sowel skaam as kwaad.

“Dis hoe dit deesdae oral gaan,” sê mnr. Borgin in sy olierige stem. “Towenaarbloed word al minder gereken —”

“Nie in my familie nie,” sê mnr. Malfoy en sy lang neusvleuels rek.

“Ook nie in myne nie, meneer,” sê mnr. Borgin en buig diep.

“In daardie geval kan ons miskien terugkeer na my lys,” sê mnr. Malfoy kortaf. “Ek is ietwat haastig, Borgin, ek het belangrike sake om af te handel.”

Hulle begin oor pryse knibbel. Harry raak senuagtig hoe nader Draco aan sy wegkruipplek kom. Malfoy is besig om die items wat te koop is, te bekyk. Hy staan ’n hele ruk en kyk na ’n rol galgtou en hy grynslag toe hy die kaartjie lees wat by ’n manjifieke halssnoer van opale staan: *Wees gewaarsku: Moenie aanraak. Vervloek — het tot op datum die lewens van negentien Moggeleienaars geëis.*

Draco draai weg en sien die kabinet reg voor hom. Hy stap nader . . . steek sy hand na die handvatsel toe uit en . . .

“Reg so,” sê mnr. Malfoy by die toonbank. “Kom, Draco!”

Harry vee sy voorkop aan sy mou af toe Draco dadelik wegdraai.

“Tot siens, mnr. Borgin, ek verwag u dan môre by die herehuis om die goedere te kom haal.”

Die oomblik dat die deur toegaan, laat vaar mnr. Borgin sy olierige maniertjies.

“Goeiedag jouself, meneer Malfoy, en as die gerugte waar is, het jy nie die helfte van wat in jou *herehuis* versteek is, verkoop nie . . .” sê hy smalend.

Mnr. Borgin verdwyn brom-brom na een van die agterste kamers. Harry wag 'n paar oomblikke ingeval hy sou terugkom, toe, so stil soos 'n muis, klouter hy uit die kabinet, glip verby die glaskaste en uit by die winkel se deur.

Hy hou sy gebreekte bril voor sy gesig en staar om hom. Hy staan in 'n smerige gangetjie wat lyk of al die winkels in die donker kunste spesialiseer. Die een waar hy so pas was, Borgin en Burkes, lyk na die grootste, maar aan die oorkant is 'n nare toonvenster vol gekrimpde koppe, en twee deure verder is 'n yslike kou vol reusagtige swart spinnekoppe. Twee toingrige towenaars hou hom dop vanuit die skaduwee van 'n ingang. Hulle mompel vir mekaar. Harry voel goed skrikkerig; hy probeer sy bril op sy neus hou en hoop van harte dat hy die pad uit hierdie plek sal kry.

'n Ou houtteken bo 'n winkel wat gifkerse verkoop, vertel hom dat dit Konkulstraat is. Dit help nie juis nie, want Harry het nog nooit tevore daarvan gehoor nie. Al wat hy kan dink, is dat die as in sy mond hom onduidelik laat praat het toe hy in die Weasleys se vuur gestaan het. Hy doen sy bes om kalm te bly terwyl hy wonder wat om te doen.

"Verdwaal, seun?" sê 'n stem in sy oor sodat hy wip van die skrik.

Voor hom staan 'n stokou heks. Sy hou 'n skinkbord vas, vol goed wat verskriklik baie na hele menslike vingernaels lyk. Sy glimlag skeef sodat hy haar aangepakte tande kan sien. Harry tree agteruit.

"Nee, nee dankie," sê hy, "ek gaan net –"

"HARRY! Wat dink jy doen jy hier?"

Harry se hart spring. Die ou heks ook; haar vingernaels vlieg die wêreld vol en sy vloek toe die massiewe figuur van Hagrid, Hogwarts se boswagter, aangestryk kom. Sy swart kewerogies blits bo sy groot stekelbaard.

"Hagrid!" Harry is skoon skor van verligting. "Ek het verdwaal . . . Floopoeier . . ." Hagrid gryp Harry agter die nek en trek hom so woes van die ou heks af weg dat hy haar skinkbord skoon uit haar hande stamp. Haar krete volg hulle deur die kronkelende gangetjies tot hulle in die helder sonlig kom. In die verte sien Harry 'n bekende, sneeuwit marmergebou: Edelgoltbank. Hagrid het hom reguit Diagonaalstraat toe gebring.

"Kyk hoe lyk jy!" sê Hagrid en borsel die roet so rof van Harry af dat hy amper in 'n vaatjie vol draakmis net voor die apteek val. "Sluip so wraggies in Konkulstraat rond, ek weet darem nie – nare plek, Harry – mens wil nie daar gesien wees nie –"

"Ek het so agtergekom," sê Harry en koes toe dit lyk of Hagrid hom weer wil afstof. "Ek sê jou mos, ek het verdwaal – maar wat het jy nogal daar gemaak?"

"Ek was op soek na Vleisetende Slakpille," grom Hagrid. "Die goed maak amok onder die skool se kopkole. Jy is dus nie op jou eie nie?"

“'k kuier by die Weasleys, maar ons het mekaar verloor,” verduidelik Harry. “Ek moet hulle gaan soek . . .”

Hulle stap saam die straat af.

“Hoekom het jy nooit vir my geskryf nie?” sê Hagrid, terwyl Harry draf om by te hou (hy gee drie tree vir elke een wat Hagrid in sy enorme stewels gee). Harry verduidelik alles oor Dobbi en die Dursleys.

“Verbrande Moggels,” grom Hagrid. “As ek darem geweet het –”

“Harry! Harry! Hier is ek!”

Harry kyk op en sien vir Hermien la Grange aan die bopunt van die wit trappe wat na Edulgolt lei. Sy hardloop af om te kom groet, sodat haar bos bruin hare agter haar wapper.

“Wat het met jou bril gebeur? Hallo, Hagrid . . . O, maar dis wonderlik om julle weer te sien . . . Kom jy Edulgolt toe, Harry?”

“Sodra ek die Weasleys gekry het,” sê Harry.

“Jy hoef nie te lank te wag nie,” sê Hagrid en grinnik.

Harry en Hermien kyk om; Ron, Fred, George, Percy en mnr. Weasley kom deur die besige straat aangehardloop.

“Harry,” hyg mnr. Weasley. “Ons het *gehoop* jy’t net een vuurherd te ver gegaan . . .” Hy vee oor sy glinsterende pankop. “Molly is buite haarself – sy’s op pad.”

“Waar het jy uitgekom?” vra Ron.

“Konkulstraat,” sê Harry grimmig.

“*Fantasties!*” sê Fred en George tesame.

“Ons mag nog nooit soontoe gegaan het nie,” sê Ron jaloers.

“Ek sou verbrands so dink,” grom Hagrid.

Mev. Weasley kom aangedraf, haar handsak swaai wild aan een hand en Ginny klou net-net aan die ander een vas.

“O, Harry – o, my kind – jy kon enige plek beland het –”

Sy snak nog na asem, toë haal sy al ’n yslike klereborsel uit haar sak en begin om die roet af te borsel wat Hagrid nie kon afkry nie. Mnr. Weasley vat Harry se bril, tik met sy towerstaf daarteen en gee dit terug, so goed soos nuut.

“Wel, ek moet gaan,” sê Hagrid, wie se hand amper deur mev. Weasley afgedraai is. “Konkulstraat! As jy hom darem nie gekry het nie, Hagrid!” “Sien julle by Hogwarts!” Toe stap hy weg, kop en skouers langer as enigiemand anders in die besige straat.

“Raai vir wie’t ek in Borgin en Burkes gesien,” sê Harry vir Ron en Hermien toe hulle by die trappe na Edulgolt opstap. “Malfoy en sy pa.”

“Het Lucius Malfoy iets gekoop?” vra mnr. Weasley skerp agter hulle.

“Nee, hy het verkoop.”

“Hy’s dus bekommerd,” sê mnr. Weasley grimmig, maar hy klink ook in sy skik. “O, ek sal dit darem geniet om vir Lucius Malfoy vas te trek . . .”

“Wees tog versigtig, Arthur,” sê mev. Weasley kwaai toe hulle by die

bank verwelkom word deur die buigende gnoom by die deur. "Daardie mense beteken moeilikheid, moenie jouself oorskat nie."

"So jy dink ek kan nie my man teen Lucius Malfoy staan nie?" sê mnr. Weasley verontwaardig, maar gelukkig sien hy Hermien se ouers raak. Hulle staan ietwat verbouereerd by die toonbank wat reg om die marmersaal loop, en wag dat Hermien hulle moet voorstel.

"Maar julle is Moggels!" sê mnr. Weasley in sy skik. "Ons moet hierop drink! Wat het julle daar? O, julle ruil Moggelgeld. Kyk, Molly!" Hy beduie opgewonde na die note in mnr. La Grange se hand.

"Sien jou weer hier," sê Ron vir Hermien toe die Weasleys en Harry deur nog 'n gnoom weggelei word om na hul ondergrondse kluis te gaan.

Die kluis word bereik deur kleinerige karretjies wat langs smal treinspore deur die bank se ondergrondse tonnells jaag. Harry geniet die wilde rit na die Weasleys se kluis terdeë, maar voel ellendig, erger selfs as in Konkulstraat, toe dit oopgemaak word. Daar is 'n klein stapeltjie silwer Sekels en net een goue Galjoen. Mev. Weasley gooi die hele spulletjie in haar handsak. Harry voel nog erger toe hulle by sy kluis kom. Hy probeer so staan dat niemand kan sien wat daarin is nie en gooi 'n paar hande vol munte vinnig in 'n leersak.

Terug by die marmertappe slaan elkeen sy eie koers in. Percy mompel iets oor 'n nuwe veerpen wat hy nodig het. Fred en George het hul vriend van Hogwarts, Lee Jordaan, gesien. Mev. Weasley en Ginny gaan na die tweedehandse mantelwinkel. Mnr. Weasley dring daarop aan om die La Granges vir 'n drankie na Die Kokende Pot te neem.

"Ons kry mekaar oor 'n uur by Sierskrif en Klatt om jul skoolboeke te koop," sê mev. Weasley voor sy en Ginny die pad vat. "En julle sit nie 'n voet in Konkulstraat nie!" roep sy agter die tweeling aan.

Harry, Ron en Hermien loop al langs die kronkelende straatjie wat met keistene uitgelê is. Die goue, silwer- en kopermunte klingel vrolik in Harry se sak en vra eenvoudig om uitgegee te word, dus koop hy drie groot aarbei-en-grondboontjie-roomyse wat hulle vrolik opslurp terwyl hulle in die straatjie stap en na die fantastiese winkelvensters kyk. Ron staar verlangend na 'n volledige stel Chudley Cannon-mantels in die toonvenster van "Kwaliteit Kwiddiek-toebehore" tot Hermien hom wegsleep om ink en perkament langsaan te gaan koop. By Prettige Poetse se Towergrapwinkel kry hulle vir Fred, George en Lee Jordaan besig om genoeg voorraad op te koop van Dr. Vrijbouter se Ongelooflike Nat-en-Droë Vuurwerke, en in 'n klein rommelwinkelletjie vol gebreekte towerstawwe, lendelam koperskale en ou jasse vol towerdrankievlekke, kry hulle vir Percy, verdiep in 'n klein en besonder vervelige boek met die titel: *Prefekte in Magsposisies*.

"'n Studie van Hogwarts se prefekte en hul latere loopbane," lees Ron hardop van die agterblad af. "Klink fassinerend . . ."

"Gaan weg," snou Percy.

"Hy's vreeslik ambisieus, Percy, het alles beplan . . . wil Minister van Towerkuns word . . ." sê Ron in 'n gedempte stem aan Harry en Hermien toe hulle verder stap.

'n Uur later sit hulle af na Sierskrif en Klatt. Hulle is nie die enigste mense op pad soontoe nie. Toe hulle nader kom, sien hulle tot hul verbasing 'n groot skare voor die deure wat stamp en stoot om te kan inkom. Die rede hiervoor staan op 'n groot banier wat tussen die boonste vensters gespan is:

GILDEROY LOCKHART

teken eksemplare van sy outobiografie

EK, DIE BETOWERENDE

vandag vanaf 12.30 – 4.30 nm

"Ons kan hom in lewende lywe ontmoet!" roep Hermien uit. "Ek bedoel, hy't omtrent die hele boeklys geskryf!"

Die meeste mense in die skare is hekse van so min of meer mev. Weasley se ouderdom. 'n Stokflou Townenaar staan by die deur en sê, "Wees net kalm, asseblief, dames . . . moenie stoot nie . . . pasop vir die boeke . . ."

Harry, Ron en Hermien druk deur die mense tot hulle binne is. 'n Lang tou strek tot reg aan die agterkant van die boekwinkel waar Gilderoy Lockhart sy boeke teken. Hulle gryp elkeen 'n eksemplaar van *Dans met die Doodsbode* en glip al met die tou langs tot waar die res van die Weasleys by mnr. en mev. La Grange staan.

"O, daar is julle, dis gaaf," sê mev. Weasley. Sy klink kortasem en hou aan druk aan haar hare. "Ons behoort hom nou enige oomblik te kan sien . . ."

Gilderoy Lockhart word stadig sigbaar. Hy sit by 'n tafel omring deur groot foto's van sy eie gesig, wat al winkend skitterwit tande na die skare flits. Die ware Lockhart dra 'n kleed van vergeet-my-nietjie-blou, wat presies die kleur van sy oë is, en sy gepunte towenaarshoed sit windmakerig skeef op sy golwende hare.

'n Kort mannetjie wat goed omgekrap lyk, dans rond en neem foto's met 'n groot swart kamera wat pers rookwolke maak elke keer dat die flitslig afgaan.

"Gee pad daar," snou hy vir Ron en tree terug om 'n beter foto te kan neem. "Dit is vir die *Daaglikse Profeet*."

"Kamtig belangrik" sê Ron en vryf sy voet waar die fotograaf daarop getrap het.

Gilderoy Lockhart het hom gehoor. Hy kyk op. Hy sien vir Ron – en toe sien hy vir Harry. Hy staar. Toe spring hy op en skreeu behoorlik, "Is dit tog nie *Harry Potter* nie?"

Die skare fluister opgewonde en maak 'n pad vir hom oop. Lockhart storm vorentoe, gryp Harry aan die arm en trek hom tot voor. Almal klap hande. Harry se gesig is bloedrooi toe Lockhart sy hand skud, terwyl die fotograaf soos 'n besetene foto's neem en wolke dik rook oor die Weasleys blaas.

"Mooi groot glimlag, Harry," sê Lockhart deur sy glansende wit tande. "Ek en jy saam is werklik 'n voorblad werd."

Toe hy Harry se hand uiteindelik los, kan Harry beswaarlik sy vingers voel. Hy probeer weggliip na die Weasleys toe, maar Lockhart slaan 'n arm om sy skouers en druk hom styf teen hom vas.

"Dames en here," sê hy hard en hou 'n hand op vir stilte. "Wat 'n besondere oomblik is dit nie! Die perfekte oomblik vir my om iets waaroor ek lankal dink, aan te kondig!"

"Toe jong Harry vandag hier by Sierskrif en Klatt instap, wou hy bloot my outobiografie kom koop – wat ek met trots aan hom gaan oorhandig, heeltemal gratis –" weer klap die mense hande, "– hy het nie 'n *idee* gehad," gaan Lockhart voort en skud Harry aan die skouers sodat sy bril tot op die punt van sy neus sak, "dat hy binnekort veel, veel meer as my boek, *Ek, die Betowerende*, gaan hê nie. Hy en sy skoolmaats gaan inderwaarheid die regte, egte, betowerende ek in hul midde hê. Ja, dames en here, dis met groot vreugde en trots dat ek aankondig dat ek van September af die pos van Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste te Hogwarts Skool van Towerkuns en Heksery gaan beklee!"

Al die mense juig hom toe en klap hande en Gilderoy Lockhart oorhandig sy hele reeks boeke aan Harry, heeltemal gratis. Hy steier so ietwat onder die gewig, maar slaag daarin om na die kant van die vertrek te strompel waar Ginny langs haar nuwe hekseketel staan.

"Dis vir jou," mompel Harry terwyl hy die boeke in die hekseketel laat val. "Ek sal my eie koop –"

"Wed jy't dit gate uit geniet, of hoe, Potter?" sê 'n stem wat Harry sonder enige moeite herken. Hy kom orent en bevind homself van aangesig tot aangesig met Draco Malfoy, wat sy gewone grynslag op sy gesig het.

"Die *beroemde* Harry Potter," sê Malfoy. "Kan nie eens na 'n *boekwinkel* gaan sonder om die voorblaaie te haal nie."

"Los hom uit, hy't nie daarvoor gevra nie!" sê Ginny. Dis die eerste keer dat sy voor Harry praat. Sy gluur na Malfoy.

"H'm, ek sien jy't 'n *meisie*, Potter!" sê Malfoy in 'n dralende stem. Ginny word bloedrooi terwyl Ron en Hermien, elk met 'n stapel Lockhartboeke, 'n pad na hulle toe oopdruk.

"O, dis jy," sê Ron en kyk na Malfoy asof hy iets naars is wat aan sy skoensool kleef. "Wed jy's verras om vir Harry hier te sien, h'm?"

"Nie so verras as om jou hier te sien nie, Weasley," kap Malfoy terug. "Jou ouers sal seker vir maande moet honger ly om vir alles te betaal."

Ron bloos net so rooi soos Ginny. Hy laat val sy boeke ook in die hekseketel en maak 'n beweging in Malfoy se rigting, maar Harry en Hermien gryp hom aan die agterkant van sy baadjie.

“Ron!” sê mnr. Weasley, terwyl hy en Fred en George na hulle toe aankom. “Wat dink jy doen jy? Kom ons gaan uit, dis 'n malspul hier binne.”

“Wel, wel, wel – as dit nie Arthur Weasley is nie.”

Dit is mnr. Malfoy. Sy hand rus op Draco se skouer en dieselfde grynslag speel om sy lippe.

“Lucius,” sê mnr. Weasley en knik koudweg.

“Besig by die Ministerie, hoor ek,” sê mnr. Malfoy. “Al daardie klopjagte . . . ek hoop hulle betaal jou oortyd?”

Hy steek 'n hand in Ginny se hekseketel en haal 'n baie ou, verweerde eksemplaar van *Die Beginner se Handleiding tot Transfigurasie* tussen die Lockhart-glansboeke uit.

“Duidelik nie,” sê hy. “My tyd, watter nut het dit om 'n klad op die naam van alle towenaars te wees, as 'n mens nie eens ordentlik daarvoor betaal word nie?”

Mnr. Weasley word nog rooier as óf Ginny óf Ron.

“Ons idees oor wat die naam van towenaars beklad, verskil geheel en al, Malfoy,” sê hy.

“Dit is duidelik,” sê mnr. Malfoy en sy bleek oë dwaal na mnr. en mev. La Grange wat huiwerig eenkant staan. “Die mense met wie jy meng, Weasley . . . en ek dag jou familie kan nie laer daal nie –”

Daar is 'n geklink van metaal toe Ginny se hekseketel uit die pad geskop word en mnr. Weasley homself op mnr. Malfoy slinger en hom teen 'n rak vol boeke stamp. Dosyne swaar toorboeke tuimel op hul koppe; 'n kreet van, “Slaan hom, Pa!” kom van Fred of George; mev. Weasley gil, “Nee, Arthur, nee!”; die skare stamp en stoot om uit te kom en nog meer rakke tuimel om; “Menere, asseblief – asseblief!” skree 'n verkoopsman en toe kom dit, hierdie keer baie harder, “Maar sal julle end kry! Menere, hou op –”

Hagrid kom deur die see van boeke aangestap. Binne 'n oogwenk het hy mnr. Weasley en mnr. Malfoy van mekaar af getrek. Mnr. Weasley se lip is gesny en *Die Ensiklopedie van Paddastoel* het mnr. Malfoy in die oog getref. Hy klou nog steeds aan Ginny se tweedehandse transfigurasieboek vas. Hy hou dit na haar uit en sy oë flikker boosaardig.

“Hier, meisiekind – vat jou boek – dis die beste wat jou pa vir jou kan gee –”

Toe wikkell hy homself uit Hagrid se greep, wink vir Draco en swiep uit die winkel.

“Jy moes hom uitgelos het, Arthur,” sê Hagrid en stamp mnr. Weasley amper van sy voete af soos hy sy kleed regtrek. “Vrot tot in die murg, die

hele ou spul, almal weet dit. G'n Malfoy is dit werd om na te luister nie. Swak bloedlyn, dis wat dit is. Toe, kom nou – kom ons maak spore.”

Dit wil lyk of die verkoopsman hulle gaan keer, maar hy kom skaars tot by Hagrid se middel en staan dus onwillig opsy. Hulle haas hulle op in die straat, die La Granges is bewerig geskrik en mev. Weasley is buite haarself van woede.

“’n *Wonderlike* voorbeeld vir die kinders . . . baklei in die openbaar . . . wat moet Gilderoy Lockhart van ons dink . . .”

“Hy’t daarvan gehou,” sê Fred, “Het julle nie gehoor wat hy sê toe ons uitstap nie? Hy’t gesê daardie man van die *Daaglikse Profeet* moet die geveg in sy verslag inwerk – dis glo publisiteit.”

Dit is ’n baie bedeesde groepie wat terugstap na die vuurherd in Die Kokende Pot, van waar Harry, die Weasleys en al hul inkopies met ’n paar knippies Floopoeier terug na Die Konynenes sal reis. Hulle groet die La Granges, wat sommer deur die kroeg na die Moggelstraat oorkant gaan stap, van waar hulle ’n bus sal haal. Mnr. Weasley wil-wil begin uitvra oor hoe bushaltes nou eintlik werk, maar die trek op mev. Weasley se gesig maak hom vinnig stil.

Harry haal sy bril af en bêre dit veilig in sy sak voor hy ’n knippie Floopoeier neem. Dit is beslis nie sy gunstelingmanier van reis nie.

CHAPTER FIVE



THE WHOMPING WILLOW

The end of the summer vacation came too quickly for Harry's liking. He was looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts, but his month at the Burrow had been the happiest of his life. It was difficult not to feel jealous of Ron when he thought of the Dursleys and the sort of welcome he could expect next time he turned up on Privet Drive.

On their last evening, Mrs. Weasley conjured up a sumptuous dinner that included all of Harry's favorite things, ending with a mouthwatering treacle pudding. Fred and George rounded off the evening with a display of Filibuster fireworks; they filled the kitchen with red and blue stars that bounced from ceiling to wall for at least half an hour. Then it was time for a last mug of hot chocolate and bed.

It took a long while to get started next morning. They were up at dawn, but somehow they still seemed to have a great deal to do. Mrs. Weasley dashed about in a bad mood looking for spare socks and quills; people kept colliding on the stairs, half-dressed with bits of toast in their hands; and Mr. Weasley nearly broke his neck, tripping over a stray chicken as he crossed the yard carrying Ginny's trunk to the car.

Harry couldn't see how eight people, six large trunks, two owls, and a rat were going to fit into one small Ford Anglia. He had reckoned, of course, without the special features that Mr. Weasley had added.

"Not a word to Molly," he whispered to Harry as he opened the trunk and showed him how it had been magically expanded so that the luggage fitted easily.

When at last they were all in the car, Mrs. Weasley glanced into the back seat, where Harry, Ron, Fred, George, and Percy were all sitting comfortably side by side, and said, "Muggles *do* know more than we give them credit for, don't they?" She and Ginny got into the front seat, which had been stretched so that it resembled a park bench. "I mean, you'd never know it was this roomy from the outside, would you?"

Mr. Weasley started up the engine and they trundled out of the yard, Harry turning back for a last look at the house. He barely had time to wonder when he'd see it again when they were back — George had forgotten his box of Filibuster fireworks. Five minutes after that, they skidded to a halt in the yard so that Fred could run in for his broomstick. They had almost reached the highway when Ginny

shrieked that she'd left her diary. By the time she had clambered back into the car, they were running very late, and tempers were running high.

Mr. Weasley glanced at his watch and then at his wife.

"Molly, dear —"

"*No*, Arthur —"

"No one would see — this little button here is an Invisibility Booster I installed — that'd get us up in the air — then we fly above the clouds. We'd be there in ten minutes and no one would be any the wiser —"

"I said *no*, Arthur, not in broad daylight —"

They reached King's Cross at a quarter to eleven. Mr. Weasley dashed across the road to get trolleys for their trunks and they all hurried into the station.

Harry had caught the Hogwarts Express the previous year. The tricky part was getting onto platform nine and three-quarters, which wasn't visible to the Muggle eye. What you had to do was walk through the solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. It didn't hurt, but it had to be done carefully so that none of the Muggles noticed you vanishing.

"Percy first," said Mrs. Weasley, looking nervously at the clock overhead, which showed they had only five minutes to disappear casually through the barrier.

Percy strode briskly forward and vanished. Mr. Weasley went next; Fred and George followed.

"I'll take Ginny and you two come right after us," Mrs. Weasley told Harry and Ron, grabbing Ginny's hand and setting off. In the

blink of an eye they were gone.

“Let’s go together, we’ve only got a minute,” Ron said to Harry.

Harry made sure that Hedwig’s cage was safely wedged on top of his trunk and wheeled his trolley around to face the barrier. He felt perfectly confident; this wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as using Floo powder. Both of them bent low over the handles of their trolleys and walked purposefully toward the barrier, gathering speed. A few feet away from it, they broke into a run and —

CRASH.

Both trolleys hit the barrier and bounced backward; Ron’s trunk fell off with a loud thump, Harry was knocked off his feet, and Hedwig’s cage bounced onto the shiny floor, and she rolled away, shrieking indignantly; people all around them stared and a guard nearby yelled, “What in blazes d’you think you’re doing?”

“Lost control of the trolley,” Harry gasped, clutching his ribs as he got up. Ron ran to pick up Hedwig, who was causing such a scene that there was a lot of muttering about cruelty to animals from the surrounding crowd.

“Why can’t we get through?” Harry hissed to Ron.

“I dunno —”

Ron looked wildly around. A dozen curious people were still watching them.

“We’re going to miss the train,” Ron whispered. “I don’t understand why the gateway’s sealed itself —”

Harry looked up at the giant clock with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Ten seconds . . . nine seconds . . .

He wheeled his trolley forward cautiously until it was right against

the barrier and pushed with all his might. The metal remained solid.

Three seconds . . . two seconds . . . one second . . .

“It’s gone,” said Ron, sounding stunned. “The train’s left. What if Mum and Dad can’t get back through to us? Have you got any Muggle money?”

Harry gave a hollow laugh. “The Dursleys haven’t given me pocket money for about six years.”

Ron pressed his ear to the cold barrier.

“Can’t hear a thing,” he said tensely. “What’re we going to do? I don’t know how long it’ll take Mum and Dad to get back to us.”

They looked around. People were still watching them, mainly because of Hedwig’s continuing screeches.

“I think we’d better go and wait by the car,” said Harry. “We’re attracting too much atten —”

“Harry!” said Ron, his eyes gleaming. “The car!”

“What about it?”

“We can fly the car to Hogwarts!”

“But I thought —”

“We’re stuck, right? And we’ve got to get to school, haven’t we? And even underage wizards are allowed to use magic if it’s a real emergency, section nineteen or something of the Restriction of Thingy —”

“But your mum and dad . . .” said Harry, pushing against the barrier again in the vain hope that it would give way. “How will they get home?”

“They don’t need the car!” said Ron impatiently. “They know how

to Apparate! You know, just vanish and reappear at home! They only bother with Floo powder and the car because we're all underage and we're not allowed to Apparate yet. . . ."

Harry's feeling of panic turned suddenly to excitement.

"Can you fly it?"

"No problem," said Ron, wheeling his trolley around to face the exit. "C'mon, let's go. If we hurry we'll be able to follow the Hogwarts Express —"

And they marched off through the crowd of curious Muggles, out of the station and back onto the side road where the old Ford Anglia was parked.

Ron unlocked the cavernous trunk with a series of taps from his wand. They heaved their luggage back in, put Hedwig on the back seat, and got into the front.

"Check that no one's watching," said Ron, starting the ignition with another tap of his wand. Harry stuck his head out of the window: Traffic was rumbling along the main road ahead, but their street was empty.

"Okay," he said.

Ron pressed a tiny silver button on the dashboard. The car around them vanished — and so did they. Harry could feel the seat vibrating beneath him, hear the engine, feel his hands on his knees and his glasses on his nose, but for all he could see, he had become a pair of eyeballs, floating a few feet above the ground in a dingy street full of parked cars.

"Let's go," said Ron's voice from his right.

And the ground and the dirty buildings on either side fell away,

dropping out of sight as the car rose; in seconds, the whole of London lay, smoky and glittering, below them.

Then there was a popping noise and the car, Harry, and Ron reappeared.

“Uh-oh,” said Ron, jabbing at the Invisibility Booster. “It’s faulty —”

Both of them pummeled it. The car vanished. Then it flickered back again.

“Hold on!” Ron yelled, and he slammed his foot on the accelerator; they shot straight into the low, woolly clouds and everything turned dull and foggy.

“Now what?” said Harry, blinking at the solid mass of cloud pressing in on them from all sides.

“We need to see the train to know what direction to go in,” said Ron.

“Dip back down again — quickly —”

They dropped back beneath the clouds and twisted around in their seats, squinting at the ground.

“I can see it!” Harry yelled. “Right ahead — there!”

The Hogwarts Express was streaking along below them like a scarlet snake.

“Due north,” said Ron, checking the compass on the dashboard. “Okay, we’ll just have to check on it every half hour or so — hold on —”

And they shot up through the clouds. A minute later, they burst out into a blaze of sunlight.

It was a different world. The wheels of the car skimmed the sea of

fluffy cloud, the sky a bright, endless blue under the blinding white sun.

“All we’ve got to worry about now are airplanes,” said Ron.

They looked at each other and started to laugh; for a long time, they couldn’t stop.

It was as though they had been plunged into a fabulous dream. This, thought Harry, was surely the only way to travel — past swirls and turrets of snowy cloud, in a car full of hot, bright sunlight, with a fat pack of toffees in the glove compartment, and the prospect of seeing Fred’s and George’s jealous faces when they landed smoothly and spectacularly on the sweeping lawn in front of Hogwarts castle.

They made regular checks on the train as they flew farther and farther north, each dip beneath the clouds showing them a different view. London was soon far behind them, replaced by neat green fields that gave way in turn to wide, purplish moors, a great city alive with cars like multicolored ants, villages with tiny toy churches.

Several uneventful hours later, however, Harry had to admit that some of the fun was wearing off. The toffees had made them extremely thirsty and they had nothing to drink. He and Ron had pulled off their sweaters, but Harry’s T-shirt was sticking to the back of his seat and his glasses kept sliding down to the end of his sweaty nose. He had stopped noticing the fantastic cloud shapes now and was thinking longingly of the train miles below, where you could buy ice-cold pumpkin juice from a trolley pushed by a plump witch. *Why* hadn’t they been able to get onto platform nine and three-quarters?

“Can’t be much further, can it?” croaked Ron, hours later still, as

the sun started to sink into their floor of cloud, staining it a deep pink. “Ready for another check on the train?”

It was still right below them, winding its way past a snowcapped mountain. It was much darker beneath the canopy of clouds.

Ron put his foot on the accelerator and drove them upward again, but as he did so, the engine began to whine.

Harry and Ron exchanged nervous glances.

“It’s probably just tired,” said Ron. “It’s never been this far before. . . .”

And they both pretended not to notice the whining growing louder and louder as the sky became steadily darker. Stars were blossoming in the blackness. Harry pulled his sweater back on, trying to ignore the way the windshield wipers were now waving feebly, as though in protest.

“Not far,” said Ron, more to the car than to Harry, “not far now,” and he patted the dashboard nervously.

When they flew back beneath the clouds a little while later, they had to squint through the darkness for a landmark they knew.

“*There!*” Harry shouted, making Ron and Hedwig jump. “Straight ahead!”

Silhouetted on the dark horizon, high on the cliff over the lake, stood the many turrets and towers of Hogwarts castle.

But the car had begun to shudder and was losing speed.

“Come on,” Ron said cajolingly, giving the steering wheel a little shake, “nearly there, come on —”

The engine groaned. Narrow jets of steam were issuing from under the hood. Harry found himself gripping the edges of his seat very

hard as they flew toward the lake.

The car gave a nasty wobble. Glancing out of his window, Harry saw the smooth, black, glassy surface of the water, a mile below. Ron's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The car wobbled again.

"Come *on*," Ron muttered.

They were over the lake — the castle was right ahead — Ron put his foot down.

There was a loud clunk, a splutter, and the engine died completely.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, into the silence.

The nose of the car dropped. They were falling, gathering speed, heading straight for the solid castle wall.

"*Noooooo!*" Ron yelled, swinging the steering wheel around; they missed the dark stone wall by inches as the car turned in a great arc, soaring over the dark greenhouses, then the vegetable patch, and then out over the black lawns, losing altitude all the time.

Ron let go of the steering wheel completely and pulled his wand out of his back pocket —

"STOP! STOP!" he yelled, whacking the dashboard and the windshield, but they were still plummeting, the ground flying up toward them —

"WATCH OUT FOR THAT TREE!" Harry bellowed, lunging for the steering wheel, but too late —

CRUNCH.

With an earsplitting bang of metal on wood, they hit the thick tree trunk and dropped to the ground with a heavy jolt. Steam was billowing from under the crumpled hood; Hedwig was shrieking in

terror; a golf-ball-sized lump was throbbing on Harry's head where he had hit the windshield; and to his right, Ron let out a low, despairing groan.

"Are you okay?" Harry said urgently.

"My wand," said Ron, in a shaky voice. "Look at my wand —"

It had snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters.

Harry opened his mouth to say he was sure they'd be able to mend it up at the school, but he never even got started. At that very moment, something hit his side of the car with the force of a charging bull, sending him lurching sideways into Ron, just as an equally heavy blow hit the roof.

"What's happen — ?"

Ron gasped, staring through the windshield, and Harry looked around just in time to see a branch as thick as a python smash into it. The tree they had hit was attacking them. Its trunk was bent almost double, and its gnarled boughs were pummeling every inch of the car it could reach.

"Aaargh!" said Ron as another twisted limb punched a large dent into his door; the windshield was now trembling under a hail of blows from knuckle-like twigs and a branch as thick as a battering ram was pounding furiously on the roof, which seemed to be caving —

"Run for it!" Ron shouted, throwing his full weight against his door, but next second he had been knocked backward into Harry's lap by a vicious uppercut from another branch.

"We're done for!" he moaned as the ceiling sagged, but suddenly

the floor of the car was vibrating — the engine had restarted.

“*Reverse!*” Harry yelled, and the car shot backward; the tree was still trying to hit them; they could hear its roots creaking as it almost ripped itself up, lashing out at them as they sped out of reach.

“That,” panted Ron, “was close. Well done, car —”

The car, however, had reached the end of its tether. With two sharp clunks, the doors flew open and Harry felt his seat tip sideways: Next thing he knew he was sprawled on the damp ground. Loud thuds told him that the car was ejecting their luggage from the trunk; Hedwig’s cage flew through the air and burst open; she rose out of it with an angry screech and sped off toward the castle without a backward look. Then, dented, scratched, and steaming, the car rumbled off into the darkness, its rear lights blazing angrily.

“Come back!” Ron yelled after it, brandishing his broken wand. “Dad’ll kill me!”

But the car disappeared from view with one last snort from its exhaust.

“Can you *believe* our luck?” said Ron miserably, bending down to pick up Scabbers. “Of all the trees we could’ve hit, we had to get one that hits back.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the ancient tree, which was still flailing its branches threateningly.

“Come on,” said Harry wearily, “we’d better get up to the school. . . .”

It wasn’t at all the triumphant arrival they had pictured. Stiff, cold, and bruised, they seized the ends of their trunks and began dragging them up the grassy slope, toward the great oak front doors.

“I think the feast’s already started,” said Ron, dropping his trunk at the foot of the front steps and crossing quietly to look through a brightly lit window. “Hey — Harry — come and look — it’s the Sorting!”

Harry hurried over and, together, he and Ron peered in at the Great Hall.

Innumerable candles were hovering in midair over four long, crowded tables, making the golden plates and goblets sparkle. Overhead, the bewitched ceiling, which always mirrored the sky outside, sparkled with stars.

Through the forest of pointed black Hogwarts hats, Harry saw a long line of scared-looking first years filing into the Hall. Ginny was among them, easily visible because of her vivid Weasley hair. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall, a bespectacled witch with her hair in a tight bun, was placing the famous Hogwarts Sorting Hat on a stool before the newcomers.

Every year, this aged old hat, patched, frayed, and dirty, sorted new students into the four Hogwarts Houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin). Harry well remembered putting it on, exactly one year ago, and waiting, petrified, for its decision as it muttered aloud in his ear. For a few horrible seconds he had feared that the hat was going to put him in Slytherin, the House that had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other — but he had ended up in Gryffindor, along with Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys. Last term, Harry and Ron had helped Gryffindor win the House Championship, beating Slytherin for the first time in seven years.

A very small, mousy-haired boy had been called forward to place the hat on his head. Harry's eyes wandered past him to where Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, sat watching the Sorting from the staff table, his long silver beard and half-moon glasses shining brightly in the candlelight. Several seats along, Harry saw Gilderoy Lockhart, dressed in robes of aquamarine. And there at the end was Hagrid, huge and hairy, drinking deeply from his goblet.

"Hang on . . ." Harry muttered to Ron. "There's an empty chair at the staff table. . . . Where's Snape?"

Professor Severus Snape was Harry's least favorite teacher. Harry also happened to be Snape's least favorite student. Cruel, sarcastic, and disliked by everybody except the students from his own House (Slytherin), Snape taught Potions.

"Maybe he's ill!" said Ron hopefully.

"Maybe he's *left*," said Harry, "because he missed out on the Defense Against the Dark Arts job *again*!"

"Or he might have been *sacked*!" said Ron enthusiastically. "I mean, everyone hates him —"

"Or maybe," said a very cold voice right behind them, "he's waiting to hear why you two didn't arrive on the school train."

Harry spun around. There, his black robes rippling in a cold breeze, stood Severus Snape. He was a thin man with sallow skin, a hooked nose, and greasy, shoulder-length black hair, and at this moment, he was smiling in a way that told Harry he and Ron were in very deep trouble.

"Follow me," said Snape.

Not daring even to look at each other, Harry and Ron followed

Snape up the steps into the vast, echoing entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches. A delicious smell of food was wafting from the Great Hall, but Snape led them away from the warmth and light, down a narrow stone staircase that led into the dungeons.

“In!” he said, opening a door halfway down the cold passageway and pointing.

They entered Snape’s office, shivering. The shadowy walls were lined with shelves of large glass jars, in which floated all manner of revolting things Harry didn’t really want to know the name of at the moment. The fireplace was dark and empty. Snape closed the door and turned to look at them.

“So,” he said softly, “the train isn’t good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a *bang*, did we, boys?”

“No, sir, it was the barrier at King’s Cross, it —”

“Silence!” said Snape coldly. “What have you done with the car?”

Ron gulped. This wasn’t the first time Snape had given Harry the impression of being able to read minds. But a moment later, he understood, as Snape unrolled today’s issue of the *Evening Prophet*.

“You were seen,” he hissed, showing them the headline: *FLYING FORD ANGLIA MYSTIFIES MUGGLES*. He began to read aloud: “Two Muggles in London, convinced they saw an old car flying over the Post Office tower . . . at noon in Norfolk, Mrs. Hetty Bayliss, while hanging out her washing . . . Mr. Angus Fleet, of Peebles, reported to police . . . Six or seven Muggles in all. I believe *your* father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office?” he said, looking up at Ron and smiling still more nastily. “Dear, dear . . . his

own son . . .”

Harry felt as though he'd just been walloped in the stomach by one of the mad tree's larger branches. If anyone found out Mr. Weasley had bewitched the car . . . he hadn't thought of that. . . .

“I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow,” Snape went on.

“That tree did more damage to *us* than we —” Ron blurted out.

“*Silence!*” snapped Snape again. “Most unfortunately, you are not in my House and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall go and fetch the people who *do* have that happy power. You will wait here.”

Harry and Ron stared at each other, white-faced. Harry didn't feel hungry anymore. He now felt extremely sick. He tried not to look at a large, slimy something suspended in green liquid on a shelf behind Snape's desk. If Snape had gone to fetch Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, they were hardly any better off. She might be fairer than Snape, but she was still extremely strict.

Ten minutes later, Snape returned, and sure enough it was Professor McGonagall who accompanied him. Harry had seen Professor McGonagall angry on several occasions, but either he had forgotten just how thin her mouth could go, or he had never seen her this angry before. She raised her wand the moment she entered; Harry and Ron both flinched, but she merely pointed it at the empty fireplace, where flames suddenly erupted.

“Sit,” she said, and they both backed into chairs by the fire.

“Explain,” she said, her glasses glinting ominously.

Ron launched into the story, starting with the barrier at the station refusing to let them through.

“— so we had no choice, Professor, we couldn’t get on the train.”

“Why didn’t you send us a letter by owl? I believe *you* have an owl?” Professor McGonagall said coldly to Harry.

Harry gaped at her. Now she said it, that seemed the obvious thing to have done.

“I — I didn’t think —”

“That,” said Professor McGonagall, “is obvious.”

There was a knock on the office door and Snape, now looking happier than ever, opened it. There stood the headmaster, Professor Dumbledore.

Harry’s whole body went numb. Dumbledore was looking unusually grave. He stared down his very crooked nose at them, and Harry suddenly found himself wishing he and Ron were still being beaten up by the Whomping Willow.

There was a long silence. Then Dumbledore said, “Please explain why you did this.”

It would have been better if he had shouted. Harry hated the disappointment in his voice. For some reason, he was unable to look Dumbledore in the eyes, and spoke instead to his knees. He told Dumbledore everything except that Mr. Weasley owned the bewitched car, making it sound as though he and Ron had happened to find a flying car parked outside the station. He knew Dumbledore would see through this at once, but Dumbledore asked no questions about the car. When Harry had finished, he merely continued to peer at them through his spectacles.

“We’ll go and get our stuff,” said Ron in a hopeless sort of voice.

“What are you talking about, Weasley?” barked Professor McGonagall.

“Well, you’re expelling us, aren’t you?” said Ron.

Harry looked quickly at Dumbledore.

“Not today, Mr. Weasley,” said Dumbledore. “But I must impress upon both of you the seriousness of what you have done. I will be writing to both your families tonight. I must also warn you that if you do anything like this again, I will have no choice but to expel you.”

Snape looked as though Christmas had been canceled. He cleared his throat and said, “Professor Dumbledore, these boys have flouted the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry, caused serious damage to an old and valuable tree — surely acts of this nature —”

“It will be for Professor McGonagall to decide on these boys’ punishments, Severus,” said Dumbledore calmly. “They are in her House and are therefore her responsibility.” He turned to Professor McGonagall. “I must go back to the feast, Minerva, I’ve got to give out a few notices. Come, Severus, there’s a delicious-looking custard tart I want to sample —”

Snape shot a look of pure venom at Harry and Ron as he allowed himself to be swept out of his office, leaving them alone with Professor McGonagall, who was still eyeing them like a wrathful eagle.

“You’d better get along to the hospital wing, Weasley, you’re bleeding.”

“Not much,” said Ron, hastily wiping the cut over his eye with his sleeve. “Professor, I wanted to watch my sister being Sorted —”

“The Sorting Ceremony is over,” said Professor McGonagall. “Your sister is also in Gryffindor.”

“Oh, good,” said Ron.

“And speaking of Gryffindor —” Professor McGonagall said sharply, but Harry cut in: “Professor, when we took the car, term hadn’t started, so — so Gryffindor shouldn’t really have points taken from it — should it?” he finished, watching her anxiously.

Professor McGonagall gave him a piercing look, but he was sure she had almost smiled. Her mouth looked less thin, anyway.

“I will not take any points from Gryffindor,” she said, and Harry’s heart lightened considerably. “But you will both get a detention.”

It was better than Harry had expected. As for Dumbledore’s writing to the Dursleys, that was nothing. Harry knew perfectly well they’d just be disappointed that the Whomping Willow hadn’t squashed him flat.

Professor McGonagall raised her wand again and pointed it at Snape’s desk. A large plate of sandwiches, two silver goblets, and a jug of iced pumpkin juice appeared with a pop.

“You will eat in here and then go straight up to your dormitory,” she said. “I must also return to the feast.”

When the door had closed behind her, Ron let out a long, low whistle.

“I thought we’d had it,” he said, grabbing a sandwich.

“So did I,” said Harry, taking one, too.

“Can you believe our luck, though?” said Ron thickly through a mouthful of chicken and ham. “Fred and George must’ve flown that car five or six times and no Muggle ever saw *them*.” He swallowed

and took another huge bite. “*Why* couldn’t we get through the barrier?”

Harry shrugged. “We’ll have to watch our step from now on, though,” he said, taking a grateful swig of pumpkin juice. “Wish we could’ve gone up to the feast. . . .”

“She didn’t want us showing off,” said Ron sagely. “Doesn’t want people to think it’s clever, arriving by flying car.”

When they had eaten as many sandwiches as they could (the plate kept refilling itself), they rose and left the office, treading the familiar path to Gryffindor Tower. The castle was quiet; it seemed that the feast was over. They walked past muttering portraits and creaking suits of armor, and climbed narrow flights of stone stairs, until at last they reached the passage where the secret entrance to Gryffindor Tower was hidden, behind an oil painting of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

“Password?” she said as they approached.

“Er —” said Harry.

They didn’t know the new year’s password, not having met a Gryffindor prefect yet, but help came almost immediately; they heard hurrying feet behind them and turned to see Hermione dashing toward them.

“*There* you are! Where have you *been*? The most *ridiculous* rumors — someone said you’d been expelled for crashing a flying *car* —”

“Well, we haven’t been expelled,” Harry assured her.

“You’re not telling me you *did* fly here?” said Hermione, sounding almost as severe as Professor McGonagall.

“Skip the lecture,” said Ron impatiently, “and tell us the new password.”

“It’s ‘wattlebird,’” said Hermione impatiently, “but that’s not the point —”

Her words were cut short, however, as the portrait of the fat lady swung open and there was a sudden storm of clapping. It looked as though the whole of Gryffindor House was still awake, packed into the circular common room, standing on the lopsided tables and squashy armchairs, waiting for them to arrive. Arms reached through the portrait hole to pull Harry and Ron inside, leaving Hermione to scramble in after them.

“Brilliant!” yelled Lee Jordan. “Inspired! What an entrance! Flying a car right into the Whomping Willow, people’ll be talking about that one for years —”

“Good for you,” said a fifth year Harry had never spoken to; someone was patting him on the back as though he’d just won a marathon; Fred and George pushed their way to the front of the crowd and said together, “Why couldn’t we’ve come in the car, eh?” Ron was scarlet in the face, grinning embarrassedly, but Harry could see one person who didn’t look happy at all. Percy was visible over the heads of some excited first years, and he seemed to be trying to get near enough to start telling them off. Harry nudged Ron in the ribs and nodded in Percy’s direction. Ron got the point at once.

“Got to get upstairs — bit tired,” he said, and the two of them started pushing their way toward the door on the other side of the room, which led to a spiral staircase and the dormitories.

“Night,” Harry called back to Hermione, who was wearing a

scowl just like Percy's.

They managed to get to the other side of the common room, still having their backs slapped, and gained the peace of the staircase. They hurried up it, right to the top, and at last reached the door of their old dormitory, which now had a sign on it saying SECOND YEARS. They entered the familiar, circular room, with its five four-posters hung with red velvet and its high, narrow windows. Their trunks had been brought up for them and stood at the ends of their beds.

Ron grinned guiltily at Harry.

"I know I shouldn't've enjoyed that or anything, but —"

The dormitory door flew open and in came the other second year Gryffindor boys, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom.

"*Unbelievable!*" beamed Seamus.

"Cool," said Dean.

"Amazing," said Neville, awestruck.

Harry couldn't help it. He grinned, too.

Die Woelige Wilg

Vir Harry kom die somervakansie heeltemal te gou tot 'n einde. Hy sien daarna uit om weer na Hogwarts te gaan, maar die maand by Die Kony-
nenes was die gelukkigste van sy lewe. Dis moeilik om nie op Ron jaloers
te wees as hy aan die Dursleys dink, en die verwelkoming wat hy volgen-
de keer by Ligusterlaan kan verwag as hy daar opdaag nie.

Op hul laaste aand tower mev. Weasley 'n besonder lekker maal op wat
al Harry se gunstelingdisse insluit en eindig met 'n watertand strooppoe-
ding. Fred en George rond die aand af met 'n Vrijbouter-vuurwerkver-
toning; hulle vul die kombuis met rooi en blou sterre wat vir ten minste
'n halfuur tussen die plafon en die mure bons. Te gou is dit tyd vir 'n laas-
te beker warm kakao en daarna gaan almal inkruip.

Die volgende oggend vat dit lank voor almal gereed is. Hulle staan
saam met die hoenders op, maar daar is verskriklik baie dinge om te
doen. Mev. Weasley is uit haar humeur; sy skarrel rond op soek na ekstra
sokkies en veerpenne, mense loop in mekaar vas op die trappe, hulle is
halfaangetrek en het stukke roosterbrood in hul hande en mnr. Weasley
breek amper sy nek toe hy oor 'n verdwaalde hoender struikel terwyl hy
met Ginny se trommel oor die werf na die motor stap.

Harry kan nie sien hoe agt mense, ses groot trommels, twee uile en 'n
rot in een klein Ford Anglia gaan pas nie. Hy weet natuurlik nie van die
ekstras wat mnr. Weasley ingebou het nie.

“Nie 'n woord vir Molly nie,” fluister hy vir Harry toe hy die bagasie-
bak oopmaak en wys hoe dit op magiese wyse rek tot al die trommels met
gemak daarin pas.

Toe almal uiteindelik in is, loer mev. Weasley na die agterste sitplek
waar Harry, Ron, Fred, George en Percy gemaklik langs mekaar sit en sê,
“Die Moggels weet nogal so hier en daar 'n ding of twee, nè?” Sy en Gin-
ny gaan sit op die voorste sitplek wat so gerek het dat dit amper soos 'n
parkbank lyk. “Ek bedoel, 'n mens sou nooit sê dis so lekker ruim as jy
van buite af kyk nie.”

Mnr. Weasley skakel die enjin aan en hulle ry by die werf uit. Harry
draai terug om vir oulaas na die huis te kyk. Hy begin net wonder of hy

dit ooit weer sal sien, of hulle is terug: George het sy doos Vrijbuitervuurwerke vergeet. Vyf minute later kom hulle weer met skreeuende bande tot stilstand, sodat Fred kan inhardloop om sy besemstok te gaan haal. Hulle is amper by die snelweg toe Ginny skree dat sy haar dagboek vergeet het. Teen die tyd dat sy terug in die motor is, is hulle baie laat en loop die humeure hoog.

Mnr. Weasley loer na sy horlosie en toe na sy vrou.

“Molly, skat –”

“Nee, Arthur.”

“Niemand sal weet nie. Hierdie klein knoppie is ’n Onsigbaarheids-aanjaer wat ek laat inbou het – dit sal ons in die lug kry – dan vlieg ons bo die wolke. Binne tien minute is ons daar en geen haan sal daarna kraai nie . . .”

“Ek het gesê nee, Arthur, nie helder oordag nie.”

Teen kwart voor elf is hulle by King’s Cross-stasie. Mnr. Weasley nael oor die straat om trollies te kry om die trommels op te laai en hulle gaan die stasie haastig binne.

Harry het die Hogwarts Express die vorige jaar ook gehaal. Die moeilike deel is om op perron nege-en-’n-driekwart te kom. Dit is nie sigbaar vir Moggeloë nie. Wat jy moet doen, is om deur die soliede versperring tussen perron nege en tien te loop. Dit is glad nie seer nie, maar dit moet versigtig gedoen word sodat die Moggels nie agterkom dat jy sommer net verdwyn nie.

“Eers Percy,” sê mev. Weasley en kyk senuagtig na die horlosie wat sê dat daar nog net vyf minute oor is om ongemerk deur die versperring te verdwyn.

Percy stap vinnig vorentoe en raak weg. Mnr. Weasley gaan volgende en Fred en George volg hom.

“Ek sal vir Ginny neem, dan kom julle twee agterna,” sê mev. Weasley vir Harry en Ron. Sy gryp Ginny se hand en stap aan. Binne ’n oogwenk is hulle ook weg.

“Kom ons gaan saam, daar’s nog net ’n minuut,” sê Ron vir Harry.

Harry maak eers seker dat Hedwig se kou stewig bo-op sy trommel staan en draai dan die trollie in die rigting van die versperring. Hy voel heeltemal goed; dis nie naastenby so erg soos Floopoeier nie. Hulle buig laag oor die trolliehandvatsels en stap reguit op die versperring af. ’n Paar tree daarvandaan begin hulle hardloop en –

KABOEF

Beide trollies tref die versperring en bons terug. Ron se trommel val met ’n harde slag af, Harry tuimel oor sy trollie en Hedwig se hok bons oor die teer en rol eenkant toe, terwyl sy verontwaardige krysgeluide maak. Die mense om hulle gaap hulle aan en ’n wag daar naby skree, “Wat de dinges dink julle doen julle?”

“Beheer oor die trollies verloor,” sê Harry, terwyl hy na asem snak en sy ribbes vashou. Ron hardloop en tel vir Hedwig op, wat so te kere gaan dat ’n hele paar mense in die skare onderlangs oor dieremishandeling brom.

“Hoekom kon ons nie deurkom nie?” sis Harry vir Ron.

“Weet nie –”

Ron kyk verwilderd om hom rond. ’n Hele klomp mense staan nuuskierig na hulle.

“Ons gaan die trein mis,” fluister Ron. “Ek verstaan nie waarom die deurgang homself verseël het . . .”

Harry lig sy oë na die reusehorlosie en voel siek tot op die krop van sy maag. Tien sekondes . . . nege sekondes . . .

Hy stoot die trollie versigtig tot teen die versperring en druk met al sy krag. Die metaal bly solied.

Drie sekondes . . . twee sekondes . . . een sekonde . . .

“Dis weg,” sê Ron en hy klink oorbluf. “Die trein is weg. Wat as my ma en pa nie weer deur die versperring na ons toe kan kom nie? Het jy enige Moggelgeld?”

Harry se laggie klink hol. “Ek het vir ses jaar nooit sakgeld by die Dursleys gekry nie.”

Ron druk sy oor teen die koue versperring.

“Kan niks hoor nie,” sê hy gespanne. “Wat gaan ons doen? Ek het nie ’n idee hoe lank dit vir Ma en Pa gaan vat om by ons te kom nie.”

Hulle kyk om hulle. Daar is nog altyd mense wat na hulle staan, hoofsaaklik omdat Hedwig steeds ontsteld kry.

“Ek dink ons moet by die motor gaan wag,” sê Harry. “Ons trek te veel aanda –”

“Harry!” sê Ron en sy oë skitter. “Die motor!”

“Wat daarvan?”

“Ons kan Hogwarts toe vlieg!”

“Maar ek dag –”

“Ons is in die moeilikheid, nè? En ons moet by die skool kom, nie waar nie? Selfs minderjarige towenaars mag towerkrag gebruik as dit ’n noodgeval is, afdeling negentien of iets van die Beperking op wat ook al . . .”

Diep binne-in Harry verander die benoude gevoel skielik in een van opwinding.

“Kan jy dit vlieg?”

“Maklik,” sê Ron en swaai sy trollie in die rigting van die uitgang. “Kom, as ons gou maak, kan ons die Hogwarts Express volg!”

Hulle laat vat deur die skare nuuskierige Moggels, uit by die stasie en terug na die dwarsstraat waar die ou Ford Anglia geparkeer is.

Ron sluit die enorme bagasiebak oop met ’n paar tikkies van sy to-

werstaf. Hulle laai die trommels weer in, sit vir Hedwig op die agterste sitplek en klim voor in.

“Maak net seker dat niemand kyk nie,” sê Ron en skakel die motor aan met nog ’n tikkie van sy towerstaf. Harry steek sy kop deur die venster: hy hoor die geraas van verkeer in die hoofpad voor hulle, maar hul straat is leeg.

“Reg,” sê hy.

Ron druk ’n klein silwer knoppie op die paneelbord. Om hulle verdwyn die motor – en hulle ook. Harry kan die sitplek onder hom voel tril, hy hoor die enjin, voel sy hande op sy knieë en die bril op sy neus, maar vir al wat hy kan sien, het hy ’n paar oogballe geword wat ’n ent bo ’n smerige straat vol geparkeerde motors swewe.

“Weg is ons,” sê Ron se stem aan sy regterkant.

Die grond en die verwaarloosde geboue aan weerskante van hulle val weg en verdwyn heeltemal toe die motor opstyg; binne sekondes lê die hele rokerige, glansende Londen ver onder hulle.

Skielik is daar ’n poefgeluid en die motor, Harry en Ron word weer sigbaar.

“O, tjorts,” sê Ron en druk-druk op die Onsigbaarheidsaanjaer. “Hier’s fout –”

Nou pomp albei van hulle die knoppie. Die motor verdwyn. Dan flikker dit weer terug.

“Hou vas!” gil Ron en trap die versneller weg sodat die motor die wolgerige wolke binneskiet en alles om hulle vaal en mistig word en hulle uit sig verdwyn.

“Wat nou?” sê Harry, en hy knipper sy oë in ’n vergeefse poging om deur die soliede wolkemassa om hulle te sien.

“Ek moet die trein vind om te sien in watter rigting ons moet vlieg,” sê Ron.

“Nou maar sak, sak, maak net gou –”

Hulle daal tot onder die wolke en draai rond in hul sitplekke om grond toe te tuur –

“Daar’s dit!” gil Harry. “Reg voor ons – daar!”

Die Hogwarts Express gly soos ’n bloedrooi slang oor die aarde.

“Noord,” sê Ron en loer na die kompas op die paneelbord. “Goed, ons sal elke halfuur of so weer moet kom kyk. Hou vas . . .” Hulle skiet op deur die wolke. ’n Paar oomblikke later skyn die son weer op hulle.

Dis ’n ander wêreld. Die motor se wiele skeer oor die donsige see van wolke en die lug is eindeloos blou onder die verblindende wit son.

“Al waaroor ons ons nou hoef te bekommer, is vliegstuie,” sê Ron.

Hulle kyk na mekaar en bars uit van die lag; hulle kan vir ’n lang tyd nie ophou nie.

Dis of hulle in ’n ongelooflike droom getuimel het. Dit, dink Harry, is

al manier hoe 'n mens moet reis: verby 'n warreling van toiings, sneeuwit wolke, in 'n motor gevul met warm, helder sonskyn, met 'n vet pak toffies voor in die paneelkassie en die vooruitsig van Fred en George se jaloerse gesigte wanneer hulle gladweg en sierlik op die uitgestrekte grasperk voor die Hogwartskasteel neerstryk.

Hulle kyk elke nou en dan waar die trein is en vlieg al verder noord, elke duik onder die wolke in lê 'n nuwe uitsig bloot. Sommer gou lê Londen ver agter hulle en sien hulle netjiese groen landerye wat verander in groot perserige moerasse, dorpies met klein speelgoedkerkies en 'n stad vol motors wat soos veelkleurige miere lyk.

'n Paar uur later moet Harry egter toegee dat lekker net 'n vinger lank is. Die toffies het hulle ontsettend dors gemaak en daar is niks om te drink nie. Hy en Ron het hul truie uitgetrek, maar Harry se T-hemp kleef aan sy sitplek en sy bril gly aanmekaar tot op die punt van sy natgeswete neus. Hy sien nie meer die fantastiese wolkformasies raak nie en dink verlangend aan die trein daar ver onder hulle, waar jy yskoue pampoen-sap by die vet heks met die trollie kan koop. *Hoekom* kon hulle nie op perron nege-en-'n-driekwart kom nie?

“Kan nie meer ver wees nie,” sê Ron skor toe die son ure later onder hul vloer van wolke wegsink en dit in 'n diep pienk verkleur. “Sal ons gou weer gaan kyk waar die trein is?”

Dis nog reg onder hulle, dit kronkel om 'n sneeubedekte berg. Dit is baie donkerder onder die wolkekombers as daar bo.

Ron trap die versneller en hulle breek weer deur die wolke, maar op daardie oomblik begin die enjin te kerm.

Harry en Ron kyk senuagtig na mekaar.

“Dis seker moeg,” sê Ron. “Dit het nog nooit tevore so ver gevlieg nie . . .”

Albei van hulle maak of hulle glad nie agterkom dat die enjin al harder en harder kerm terwyl die lug geleidelik donkerder word nie. Sterre begin flikker teen die swart naghemel. Harry trek weer sy trui aan en probeer die feit ignoreer dat die hoofligte al flouer skyn.

“Nie meer ver nie,” sê Ron, meer vir die motor as vir Harry, “nie meer ver nie,” en hy streel so half bewurig oor die paneelbord.

Toe hulle 'n rukkie later weer onder die wolke vlieg, moet hulle hul oë op skrefies trek om 'n bekende baken in die donkerte te kan sien.

“Daar!” skree Harry sodat Ron en Hedwig wip. “Reg voor ons!”

Soos 'n skadubeeld op die donker horison, hoog op die krans bo die meer, staan die torinkies en kantele van die Hogwartskasteel.

Nou ruk die motor en verloor spoed.

“Toe nou,” praat Ron mooi, en skud die stuurwiel so effens, “amper daar, amper daar –”

Die enjin kreun. Dun straaltjies stoom spuit onder die enjinkap uit.

Harry kom agter dat hy styf aan die kante van sy sitplek klou, terwyl hulle op die meer afpyl.

Die motor skommel gevaarlik. Harry kyk deur sy venster en sien die gladde, blink, glasige oppervlak van die water, 'n goeie kilometer onder hulle. Weer bokspring die motor.

“Toe nou,” mompel Ron.

Hulle is oor die meer . . . die kasteel is reg voor hulle . . . Ron trap die versneller plat.

Daar is 'n harde klonkgeluid, 'n gespetter, en toe gaan staan die enjin.

“O, gaats,” kom Ron se stem deur die stilte.

Die motor se neus sak. Hulle val, tel spoed op en pyl reguit op die kasteel se soliede muur af . . .

“Neeeeee!” gil Ron en krink die stuurwiel skerp; hulle mis die donker klipmuur met enkele sentimeters toe die voertuig 'n wye draai gooi en oor die donker kweekhuise seil; toe oor die groentetuin, en toe oor die grasperke terwyl dit die hele tyd hoogte verloor.

Ron los die stuurwiel en pluk sy towerstaf uit sy agtersak.

“STOP! STOP!” gil hy en slaan teen die paneelbord en teen die voorruit, maar hulle val nog steeds en die grond vlieg nader en nader aan hulle . . .

“PAS OP, DIE BOOM!” brul Harry en gryp na die stuurwiel, maar dis te laat –

KRAAK.

Met 'n oorverdwende geskeur en 'n gekraak van metaal teen hout, tref hulle die dik boomstam en val met 'n dawerende slag grond toe. Stoom borrel onder die verfrommelde enjinkap uit; Hedwig krysvanangs, 'n knop so groot soos 'n gholfbal verskyn waar Harry se kop die voorruit getref het en aan sy regterkant gee Ron 'n lae, wanhopige kreun.

“Hoe voel jy?” vra Harry dringend.

“My towerstaf,” sê Ron in 'n bewerige stem. “Kyk hoe lyk my towerstaf.”

Dit het feitlik in twee gebreek; die punt swaai lossies aan enkele splinters.

Harry maak sy mond oop om te sê hy is seker hulle sal dit by die skool kan regmaak, maar die woorde stol. Op daardie oomblik voel dit of 'n bul in die kant van die motor vashardloop sodat Harry oor die sitplek trek, vas in Ron, net toe 'n ewe harde hou die motor se dak tref.

“Wat gaan aa – ?”

Ron loer deur die voorruit en snak na asem. Harry kyk om, net betyds om te sien hoe 'n tak so dik soos 'n luislang hulle tref. Dis die boom wat hulle aanval. Sy stam is amper dubbeld gebuig en sy knoesterige takke deel wild en wakker hou na die motor uit.

“Aarg!” sê Ron toe nog 'n verwronge tak 'n groot duik in sy deur

slaan; die voorruit bewe onder 'n aanslag van houe van kneukelrige takkies, en 'n tak so dik soos 'n stormram plant hou na hou op die dak, wat lyk of dit begin inmekaar sak –

“Ons moet maak dat ons wegkom!” skree Ron en gooi sy volle gewig teen die deur, maar die volgende oomblik word hy teruggestamp in Harry se skoot toe 'n harde dwarsklap die kant van die motor tref.

“Dis verby met ons!” kreun hy, want die dak sak al laer, maar skielik begin die vloer van die voertuig vibreer – die enjin het sowaar weer gevat.

“Agtertoe!” gil Harry en die motor skiet agteruit. Die boom probeer hulle nog steeds bykom; hulle hoor hoe sy wortels kraak soos hy homself uit die grond probeer skeur en na hulle slaan terwyl hulle agteruit tot buite bereik jaag.

“Dit,” sê Ron hygend, “was amper. Dankie, kar.”

Die motor het egter genoeg gehad. Met twee besliste klonkgeluide vlieg die deure oop en Harry voel hoe sy sitplek sywaarts kantel: die volgende oomblik lê hy oopgespalk op die klam grond. Harde doefgeluide laat Harry besef dat die motor besig is om hul bagasie uit die bagasiebak te slinger. Hedwig se kou trek deur die lug en bars oop; sy vlieg uit met 'n kwaai gekryns en sit af kasteel toe sonder om een keer terug te kyk. Toe, vol duike en skrape en al stomend, rammel die motor die donkerte in, terwyl sy agterligte ergerlik flikker.

“Kom terug!” gil Ron agterna en swaai sy gebreekte towerstaf. “Pa gaan my doodmaak!”

Maar met een laaste snork van die uitlaatpyp verdwyn die Anglia uit sig.

“Ook net ons geluk,” sê Ron iesegrimmig en buk om vir Skille die rot op te tel. “Van al die bome waarteen ons kon bots, moet dit juis een wees wat kan terugslaan.”

Hy loer oor sy skouer na die horingoue boom wat sy takke nog steeds dreigend in hul rigting swaai.

“Komaan,” sê Harry moeg, “ons moet by die skool kom . . .”

Dit is glad nie die triomfantlike aankoms wat hulle hul voorgestel het nie. Styf, koud en gekneus sleep hulle hul trommels moeisaam teen die grasbedekte helling uit, in die rigting van die swaar eikehoutdeure.

“Ek dink die fees het reeds begin.” Ron los sy trommel aan die voet van die trappe en stap nader om deur 'n helderverligte venster te kyk. “Haai, Harry, kom kyk – dis die Sorteerdery!”

Harry gaan vinnig nader en hy en Ron loer saam by die Groot Saal in.

Bo vier lang, oorlaaide tafels sweef ontelbare kerse in die lug, sodat die goue borde en drinkbikers skitter. Bo almal se koppe vonkel die betowerde plafon, wat die sterreheemel soos 'n spieël naboots.

Deur die woud van gepunte, swart Hogwartshoede sien Harry hoe 'n lang ry eerstejaars met benoude gesigte die Saal binnekom. Ginny is ook

daar. Sy kan maklik herken word aan haar helderrooi Weasley-hare. Professor McGonagall, 'n heks met 'n bril en 'n stywe bolla, sit die beroemde Hogwarts-sorteerhoed op 'n bankie voor die nuwelinge neer.

Hierdie stokou, vuil, gelapte en uitgerafelde hoed deel die studente elke jaar in by die vier Hogwarts-huise (Griffindor, Hoesenproes, Raweklou en Slibberin). Harry kan goed onthou toe hy dit presies een jaar gelede moes opsit, en hoe hy, versteen van angs, gewag het terwyl die hoed hardop in sy oor mompel voor hy besluit het. Vir 'n paar benoude oomblikke het hy gevrees dat die hoed hom in Slibberin gaan sit, die huis wat meer donker hekse en towenaars opgelewer het as al die ander saam – maar hy het in Griffindor beland, saam met Ron, Hermien en die res van die Weasleys. Die vorige kwartaal het Harry en Ron verseker dat Griffindor die Huiskampioenskap wen, toe Slibberin vir die eerste keer in sewe jaar verslaan is.

'n Baie klein seuntjie met muisvaal hare word vorentoe geroep om die hoed op sy kop te sit. Harry se oë dwaal verby hom na waar professor Dompeldorius, die skoolhoof, by die personeel se tafel sit en na die Sorteerder kyk. Sy lang silwer baard en halfmaanbrilglase skyn helder in die kerslig. 'n Paar stoele verder sien Harry vir Gilderoy Lockhart in 'n seegroen kleed. En heel aan die punt sit Hagrid, groot en harig. Hy drink diep uit sy beker.

“Wag 'n bietjie . . .” brom Harry teenoor Ron. “Daar's 'n leë stoel by die personeeltafel . . . Waar is Snerp?”

Professor Severus Snerp is die onderwyser van wie Harry die minste van almal hou. Harry is toevallig ook die leerling vir wie Snerp nie kan verdra nie. Snerp is wreed, sarkasties en ongewild by almal, behalwe die lede van sy eie huis, Slibberin. Snerp doseer Towerdrankies.

“Dalk is hy siek!” sê Ron hoopvol.

“Dalk is hy weg,” sê Harry, “omdat hy weer nie Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste gekry het nie!”

“Dalk het hulle hom in die pad gesteek!” sê Ron geesdriftig. “Ek bedoel, almal haat hom –”

“Of dalk,” sê 'n baie koue stem kort agter hulle, “wag hy om te hoor hoekom julle twee nie op die skooltrein was nie.”

Harry swaai om. Daar, met 'n swart kleed wat in die koel windjie wapper, staan Severus Snerp. Hy is 'n skraal man met 'n sieklike bleek vel, 'n haakneus en olierige swart hare wat op sy skouers hang, en op hierdie oomblik glimlag hy op so 'n manier dat Harry sommer weet dat hy en Ron diep in die moeilikheid is.

“Volg my,” sê Snerp.

Harry en Ron waag dit nie eens om na mekaar te loer nie. Hulle volg Snerp met die trappe op tot in die enorme, weergalmende ingangsportaal wat met vlamme fakkels verlig word. Die verruklike geur van kos

kom uit die Groot Saal, maar Snerp lei hulle weg van die warmte en lig en af langs smal kliptrappe na die kerkers.

"In," sê hy en maak 'n deur oop, ongeveer in die middel van die koue gang, en wys na binne.

Bewend stap hulle in. Dit is Snerp se kantoor. Skaduwees speel op mure waarteen rakke gepak met groot glasflesse staan. Hierin dryf allerhande grilliger goeters, waarvan Harry, op hierdie oomblik, regtig nie die name wil weet nie. Die vuurherd is donker en leeg. Snerp maak die deur toe, draai om en kyk na hulle.

"So," sê hy sag, "die trein is nie goed genoeg vir die beroemde Harry Potter en sy getroue volgeling Weasley nie. Wou almal beïndruk, of hoe, seuns?"

"Nee, professor, dit was die versperring by King's Cross, dit –"

"Stil!" sê Snerp koud. "Wat het julle met daardie motor gedoen?"

Ron sluk swaar. Dis nie die eerste keer dat Harry dink dat Snerp gedagtes kan lees nie. Maar hy verstaan 'n oomblik later, toe Snerp die aandkoerant, *Die Aandprofeet*, ooprol.

"Julle is gesien," sis hy en wys vir hulle die opskrif: VLIËËNDE FORD ANGLIA VERBLUF MOGGELS. Hy lees hardop. "Twee Moggels van Londen is oortuig dat hulle 'n ou motor oor die poskantoor se toring sien vlieg het . . . in Norfolk, om twaalfuur, het mev. Hetty Bayliss dit gesien terwyl sy haar wasgoed opgehang het . . . mnr. Angus Fleet van Peebles het die polisie geskakel . . . altesame ses of sewe Moggels. Ek verneem dat jou vader in die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Moggelartefakte werk?" sê hy en kyk na Ron en sy glimlag word nog meer gemeen. "Sjoe-sjoe-sjoe . . . sy eie seun . . ."

Dit voel vir Harry asof sy wind uitgeslaan is deur een van die mal boom se grootste takke. As iemand moet uitvind dat mnr. Weasley die kar betower het . . . hy het nooit daaraan gedink nie . . .

"Toe ek in die park gaan rondsoek het, het ek gemerk dat aansienlike skade aan 'n uiters waardevolle Woelige Wilg gedoen is," gaan Snerp voort.

"Die boom het meer skade aan *ons* –" blaker Ron uit.

"Bly stil!" snou Snerp hom weer eens toe. "Dis 'n jammerte dat julle nie in my Huis is nie en dat die besluit om julle te skors nie myne is nie. Ek gaan die mense wat wel oor daardie salige mag beskik, nou haal. Julle sal hier wag."

Wit in die gesig staar Harry en Ron na mekaar. Harry voel glad nie meer honger nie. Hy voel ontsettend naar. Hy probeer om nie na die rak agter Snerp se lessenaar te kyk, waar 'n groot, slymerige ding in groen vloeistof dryf nie. As Snerp vir professor McGonagall, die hoof van Huis Griffindor, gaan haal, is hulle nog dieper in die pekel. Sy mag dalk meer redelik as Snerp wees, maar sy is nog steeds ontsettend streng.

Tien minute later is Snerp terug met niemand anders as professor McGonagall nie. Harry het professor McGonagall al dikwels kwaad gesien, maar hy het óf vergeet hoe dun haar lippe kan word, óf hy het haar nog nooit só kwaad sien lyk nie. Die oomblik toe sy instap, lig sy haar towerstaf. Sowel Harry as Ron krimp ineen, maar sy wys bloot na die leë vuurherd waarin vlamme plotseling opspring.

“Sit,” sê sy en die twee sak in stoele langs die vuurherd neer.

“Verduidelik,” sê sy en haar brilglase blink onheilspellend.

Ron val weg, en vertel hoe hulle nie deur die versperring op die stasie kon kom nie.

“... ons het dus nie ’n keuse gehad nie, professor, ons kon nie op die trein kom nie.”

“Hoekom het julle nie vir ons ’n brief per uil gestuur nie? So ver ek weet, *het jy ’n uil*,” sê professor McGonagall in ’n koue stem aan Harry.

Harry gaap haar aan. Noudat sy dit sê, klink dit na presies wat hulle moes doen.

“Ek – ek het nie gedink –”

“Dit,” sê professor McGonagall, “is duidelik.”

Daar is ’n klop aan die kantoordeur en Snerp, wat nou nog meer in sy skik met homself lyk as tevore, maak dit oop. Daar staan professor Dompeldorius, die skoolhoof.

Harry is lam van sy kop tot sy tone. Dompeldorius lyk besonder ernstig. Hy staar oor sy lang, krom neus na hulle, sodat Harry skielik wens dat hy en Ron eerder nog steeds deur die Woelige Wilg geslaan word.

Daar is ’n lang stilte. Toe sê Dompeldorius, “Verduidelik asseblief hoekom julle dit gedoen het.”

Dit sou beter gewees het as hy op hulle geskreeu het. Harry kan die teleurstelling in sy stem nie verduur nie. Om die een of ander rede kan hy Dompeldorius nie in die oë kyk nie, en kyk af na sy knieë. Hy vertel Dompeldorius alles, behalwe dat die betowerde motor mnr. Weasley s’n is. Hy laat dit klink of hy en Ron per toeval ’n geparkeerde vlieënde motor buite die stasie gekry het. Hy weet dat Dompeldorius nie daarvoor sal val nie, maar Dompeldorius vra glad nie uit na die motor nie. Toe Harry klaar is, kyk hy steeds oor sy bril na hulle.

“Ons sal ons goed gaan haal,” sê Ron in ’n bedrukte stem.

“Waarvan praat jy, Weasley?” blaf professor McGonagall.

“Wel, julle gaan ons mos skors?” sê Ron.

Harry kyk vinnig na Dompeldorius.

“Nie vandag nie, mnr. Weasley,” sê Dompeldorius. “Maar ek moet dit vir hulle op die hart druk dat wat julle gedoen het, baie ernstig is. Ek gaan vannag nog aan jul families skryf, en ek moet julle ook waarsku dat indien julle ooit iets soortgelyks sou doen, ek gedwing sal wees om julle te skors.”

Snerp lyk soos iemand wat pas gehoor het dat Kersfees afgestel is. Hy maak keel skoon en sê, "Professor Dompeldorius, hierdie seuns het die Verordening op die Beperking van Towyery deur Minderjariges oortree, hulle het ernstige skade aan 'n ou en kosbare boom berokken . . . optrede van hierdie aard moet darem seker . . ."

"Dit is vir professor McGonagall om te besluit hoe die seuns gestraf gaan word, Severus," sê Dompeldorius bedaard. "Hulle is in haar Huis en dus ook haar verantwoordelikheid." Hy draai na professor McGonagall. "Ek moet teruggaan na die fees, Minerva, ek moet nog 'n paar afkondigings doen. Kom, Severus, daar's 'n heerlike vlatert en ek wil dit proe."

Snerp gooi 'n giftige blik na Harry en Ron voor hy by die kantoor uitswiep en hulle alleen by professor McGonagall laat, wat nog steeds soos 'n wraaksugtige arend na hulle gluur.

"Ek stel voor dat jy na die kasteel se siekeboeg gaan, Weasley, jy bloei."

"Nie te veel nie," sê Ron en vee met sy mou oor die sny bo sy oog. "Professor, ek sal graag wil sien hoe my sussie gesorteer –"

"Die Sorteër-seremonie is reeds verby," sê professor McGonagall. "Jou suster is ook in Griffindor."

"Wonderlik," sê Ron.

"Terwyl ons van Griffindor praat –" sê professor McGonagall skerp, maar Harry val haar in die rede: "Professor, toe ons die kar geneem het, het die kwartaal nog nie begin nie, dus – dus Griffindor kan nie eintlik punte daarvoor verloor nie, nè?" probeer hy, terwyl hy angstig na haar kyk.

Professor McGonagall gee hom 'n priemende blik, maar hy dink tog sy wil-wil glimlag. Haar lippe lyk ten minste nie meer heeltemal so dun nie.

"Ek sal nie punte van Griffindor aftrek nie," sê sy en Harry se hart voel sommer ligter. "Julle sal wel detensie kry."

Dit is beter as wat Harry verwag het. Dompeldorius kan maar vir die Dursleys skryf – dis niks nie. Harry weet goed dat al waaroor hulle jammer sal wees, is dat die Woelige Wilg hom nie verpletter het nie.

Professor McGonagall lig weer haar towerstaf en rig dit op Snerp se lessenaar. Met 'n poefgeluid verskyn 'n groot bord toebroodjies, twee silwer drinkbekers en 'n beker vol yskoue pampoensap.

"Julle sal hier eet en daarna reguit na jul slaapsaal gaan," sê sy. "Ek moet teruggaan na die fees."

Toe die deur agter haar toegaan, fluit Ron lank en skril.

"Ek dag dit was laaste sien," sê hy en gryp 'n toebroodjie.

"Ek ook," sê Harry en neem ook een.

"Ook net ons geluk," mompel Ron deur 'n mond vol hoender en ham. "Fred en George het seker al vyf of ses keer keer met daardie kar gevlieg en g'n Moggel het nog vir hulle gesien nie." Hy sluk en vat nog 'n groot hap. "Hoekom kon ons nie deur die versperring kom nie?"

Harry lig 'n skouer. "Ons sal van nou af moet lig loop," sê hy en neem 'n groot sluk pampoensap. "Wens net ons kon na die fees gaan . . ."

"Sy wou nie hê ons moes windmakerig wees nie," sê Ron wyslik. "Wil nie hê mense moet dink dis oulik om met 'n vlieënde motor aan te kom nie."

Toe hulle soveel toebroodjies geëet het as wat hulle kan (die bord maak homself elke keer weer vol), staan hulle op, stap uit die kantoor en al langs die bekende paadjie na die Griffindor-toring. Die kasteel is stil; die fees moet klaar wees. Hulle loop verby kletsende portrette en krakende wapenrustings en klim met smal kliptrappe op, tot hulle uiteindelik by die gang kom waar die geheime ingang na die Griffindor-toring agter 'n olieverfskildery van 'n baie vet vrou in 'n pienk syrok versteek is.

"Wagwoord?" vra sy toe hulle nader kom.

"H'm –" sê Harry.

Hulle weet nie wat die nuwe jaar se wagwoord is nie, want hulle het nog nie 'n Griffindor-prefek teengekom nie, maar hulp daag feitlik onmiddellik op. Hulle hoor voetstappe agter hulle en toe hulle omdraai, is dit Hermien wat aangehardloop kom.

"Daar is julle! Waar was julle? Die belaglikste gerugte – iemand het gesê julle is geskors omdat julle 'n ongeluk met 'n *vlieënde motor* gemaak het."

"Wel, ons is nie geskors nie," verseker Harry haar.

"Moenie vir my sê julle het *regtig* hierheen gevlieg nie," sê Hermien en sy klink amper net so kwaai soos professor McGonagall.

"Los die preek," sê Ron ongeduldig, "sê liever wat die nuwe wagwoord is."

"Dis 'lelspreu'," sê Hermien, "maar dis nie die punt nie –"

Haar woorde word egter kortgeknip, want die portret van die vet vrou swaai oop en 'n skielike handegeklap klink op. Dit lyk of die hele Griffindor-huis nog wakker is. Die sirkelvormige kamer is gepak met mense wat op die skewe tafels en die sagte gemakstoele staan om vir hulle te wag. Arms reik deur die portretopening om vir Harry en Ron binnetoe te trek, terwyl Hermien agterna moet deurklouter.

"Briljant!" skree Lee Jordaan. "Ongelooflik! Wat 'n aankoms! Om so wraggies met 'n kar in die Woelige Wilg vas te ry. Mense gaan nog jare hieroor praat!"

"Skotel!" sê 'n vyfdejaar met wie Harry nog nooit tevore eens gepraat het nie; iemand klop hom op die rug asof hy so pas 'n marathon gewen het. Fred en George stoot 'n pad deur die skare oop tot voor en sê gelyk, "Hoekom het julle ons nie teruggeroep nie?" Ron is rooi in die gesig en hy grinnik verleë, maar Harry sien een persoon wat glad nie in sy skik lyk nie. Percy is sigbaar bo die koppe van 'n klomp opgewonde eerstejaars. Dit lyk of hy probeer om na genoeg aan hulle te kom sodat hy hulle

deeglik kan berispe. Harry pomp vir Ron in die ribbes en knik na Percy se kant toe. Ron snap dadelik wat aangaan.

“Moet boontoe gaan – bietjie moeg,” sê hy en die twee van hulle druk ’n pad oop na die deur aan die oorkant van die vertrek waar die wenteltrap is wat na die slaapsale lei.

“Nag,” roep Harry vir Hermien, wat net so omgekrap soos Percy lyk.

So ver as wat hulle gaan, word hulle op die rug geklop, maar hulle slaag daarin om aan die ander kant van die geselskamer te kom waar die wenteltrap is. Hulle draf tot heel bo en bereik uiteindelik die deur van hul ou slaapsaal, waar daar nou ’n bordjie is waarop “tweedejaars” staan. Hulle gaan in by die bekende, sirkelvormige vertrek met sy vyf hemelbeddens behang met rooi fluweel en sy hoë, smal vensters. Hul trommels is reeds opgeneem en staan aan die voetenent van hul beddens.

Ron grinnik skuldig vir Harry.

“Ek weet ek moet dit nie eintlik geniet het nie, maar –”

Net toe vlieg die slaapsaal se deur oop en die ander tweedejaarseuns wat ook in Huis Griffindor is, kom in: Septimus Floris, Dean Thomas en Neville Loggerenberg.

“Ongelooflik!” sê Septimus stralend.

“Fantasties,” sê Dean.

“Wonderlik,” sê Neville, ietwat oorweldig.

Harry kan dit nie help nie. Hy glimlag ook breed.

CHAPTER SIX



GILDEROY LOCKHART

The next day, however, Harry barely grinned once. Things started to go downhill from breakfast in the Great Hall. The four long House tables were laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast, and dishes of eggs and bacon, beneath the enchanted ceiling (today, a dull, cloudy gray). Harry and Ron sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione, who had her copy of *Voyages with Vampires* propped open against a milk jug. There was

a slight stiffness in the way she said “Morning,” which told Harry that she was still disapproving of the way they had arrived. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, greeted them cheerfully. Neville was a round-faced and accident-prone boy with the worst memory of anyone Harry had ever met.

“Mail’s due any minute — I think Gran’s sending a few things I forgot.”

Harry had only just started his porridge when, sure enough, there was a rushing sound overhead and a hundred or so owls streamed in, circling the hall and dropping letters and packages into the chattering crowd. A big, lumpy package bounced off Neville’s head and, a second later, something large and gray fell into Hermione’s jug, spraying them all with milk and feathers.

“*Errol!*” said Ron, pulling the bedraggled owl out by the feet. Errol slumped, unconscious, onto the table, his legs in the air and a damp red envelope in his beak.

“Oh, no —” Ron gasped.

“It’s all right, he’s still alive,” said Hermione, prodding Errol gently with the tip of her finger.

“It’s not that — it’s *that*.”

Ron was pointing at the red envelope. It looked quite ordinary to Harry, but Ron and Neville were both looking at it as though they expected it to explode.

“What’s the matter?” said Harry.

“She’s — she’s sent me a Howler,” said Ron faintly.

“You’d better open it, Ron,” said Neville in a timid whisper. “It’ll be worse if you don’t. My gran sent me one once, and I ignored it

and” — he gulped — “it was horrible.”

Harry looked from their petrified faces to the red envelope.

“What’s a Howler?” he said.

But Ron’s whole attention was fixed on the letter, which had begun to smoke at the corners.

“Open it,” Neville urged. “It’ll all be over in a few minutes —”

Ron stretched out a shaking hand, eased the envelope from Errol’s beak, and slit it open. Neville stuffed his fingers in his ears. A split second later, Harry knew why. He thought for a moment it *had* exploded; a roar of sound filled the huge hall, shaking dust from the ceiling.

“— *STEALING THE CAR, I WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED IF THEY’D EXPELLED YOU, YOU WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF YOU, I DON’T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I WENT THROUGH WHEN WE SAW IT WAS GONE —*”

Mrs. Weasley’s yells, a hundred times louder than usual, made the plates and spoons rattle on the table, and echoed deafeningly off the stone walls. People throughout the hall were swiveling around to see who had received the Howler, and Ron sank so low in his chair that only his crimson forehead could be seen.

“— *LETTER FROM DUMBLEDORE LAST NIGHT, I THOUGHT YOUR FATHER WOULD DIE OF SHAME, WE DIDN’T BRING YOU UP TO BEHAVE LIKE THIS, YOU AND HARRY COULD BOTH HAVE DIED —*”

Harry had been wondering when his name was going to crop up. He tried very hard to look as though he couldn’t hear the voice that

was making his eardrums throb.

“— *ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED — YOUR FATHER’S FACING AN INQUIRY AT WORK, IT’S ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT AND IF YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE WE’LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT BACK HOME.*”

A ringing silence fell. The red envelope, which had dropped from Ron’s hand, burst into flames and curled into ashes. Harry and Ron sat stunned, as though a tidal wave had just passed over them. A few people laughed and, gradually, a babble of talk broke out again.

Hermione closed *Voyages with Vampires* and looked down at the top of Ron’s head.

“Well, I don’t know what you expected, Ron, but you —”

“Don’t tell me I deserved it,” snapped Ron.

Harry pushed his porridge away. His insides were burning with guilt. Mr. Weasley was facing an inquiry at work. After all Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had done for him over the summer . . .

But he had no time to dwell on this; Professor McGonagall was moving along the Gryffindor table, handing out course schedules. Harry took his and saw that they had double Herbology with the Hufflepuffs first.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together, crossed the vegetable patch, and made for the greenhouses, where the magical plants were kept. At least the Howler had done one good thing: Hermione seemed to think they had now been punished enough and was being perfectly friendly again.

As they neared the greenhouses they saw the rest of the class standing outside, waiting for Professor Sprout. Harry, Ron, and

Hermione had only just joined them when she came striding into view across the lawn, accompanied by Gilderoy Lockhart. Professor Sprout's arms were full of bandages, and with another twinge of guilt, Harry spotted the Whomping Willow in the distance, several of its branches now in slings.

Professor Sprout was a squat little witch who wore a patched hat over her flyaway hair; there was usually a large amount of earth on her clothes and her fingernails would have made Aunt Petunia faint. Gilderoy Lockhart, however, was immaculate in sweeping robes of turquoise, his golden hair shining under a perfectly positioned turquoise hat with gold trimming.

“Oh, hello there!” he called, beaming around at the assembled students. “Just been showing Professor Sprout the right way to doctor a Whomping Willow! But I don't want you running away with the idea that I'm better at Herbology than she is! I just happen to have met several of these exotic plants on my travels . . .”

“Greenhouse three today, chaps!” said Professor Sprout, who was looking distinctly disgruntled, not at all her usual cheerful self.

There was a murmur of interest. They had only ever worked in greenhouse one before — greenhouse three housed far more interesting and dangerous plants. Professor Sprout took a large key from her belt and unlocked the door. Harry caught a whiff of damp earth and fertilizer mingling with the heavy perfume of some giant, umbrella-sized flowers dangling from the ceiling. He was about to follow Ron and Hermione inside when Lockhart's hand shot out.

“Harry! I've been wanting a word — you don't mind if he's a couple of minutes late, do you, Professor Sprout?”

Judging by Professor Sprout's scowl, she did mind, but Lockhart said, "That's the ticket," and closed the greenhouse door in her face.

"Harry," said Lockhart, his large white teeth gleaming in the sunlight as he shook his head. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

Completely nonplussed, Harry said nothing.

"When I heard — well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about. He was about to say so when Lockhart went on, "Don't know when I've been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts! Well, of course, I knew at once why you'd done it. Stood out a mile. Harry, Harry, *Harry*."

It was remarkable how he could show every one of those brilliant teeth even when he wasn't talking.

"Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I?" said Lockhart. "Gave you the *bug*. You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."

"Oh, no, Professor, see —"

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, reaching out and grasping his shoulder. "*I understand*. Natural to want a bit more once you've had that first taste — and I blame myself for giving you that, because it was bound to go to your head — but see here, young man, you can't start *flying cars* to try and get yourself noticed. Just calm down, all right? Plenty of time for all that when you're older. Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking! 'It's all right for him, he's an internationally famous wizard already!' But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now. In fact, I'd say I was even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All

that business with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!” He glanced at the lightning scar on Harry’s forehead. “I know, I know — it’s not quite as good as winning *Witch Weekly*’s Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have — but it’s a *start*, Harry, it’s a *start*.”

He gave Harry a hearty wink and strode off. Harry stood stunned for a few seconds, then, remembering he was supposed to be in the greenhouse, he opened the door and slid inside.

Professor Sprout was standing behind a trestle bench in the center of the greenhouse. About twenty pairs of different-colored earmuffs were lying on the bench. When Harry had taken his place between Ron and Hermione, she said, “We’ll be repotting Mandrakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the Mandrake?”

To nobody’s surprise, Hermione’s hand was first into the air.

“Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative,” said Hermione, sounding as usual as though she had swallowed the textbook. “It is used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state.”

“Excellent. Ten points to Gryffindor,” said Professor Sprout. “The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes. It is also, however, dangerous. Who can tell me why?”

Hermione’s hand narrowly missed Harry’s glasses as it shot up again.

“The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it,” she said promptly.

“Precisely. Take another ten points,” said Professor Sprout. “Now, the Mandrakes we have here are still very young.”

She pointed to a row of deep trays as she spoke, and everyone

shuffled forward for a better look. A hundred or so tufty little plants, purplish green in color, were growing there in rows. They looked quite unremarkable to Harry, who didn't have the slightest idea what Hermione meant by the "cry" of the Mandrake.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," said Professor Sprout.

There was a scramble as everyone tried to seize a pair that wasn't pink and fluffy.

"When I tell you to put them on, make sure your ears are *completely* covered," said Professor Sprout. "When it is safe to remove them, I will give you the thumbs-up. Right — earmuffs *on*."

Harry snapped the earmuffs over his ears. They shut out sound completely. Professor Sprout put the pink, fluffy pair over her own ears, rolled up the sleeves of her robes, grasped one of the tufty plants firmly, and pulled hard.

Harry let out a gasp of surprise that no one could hear.

Instead of roots, a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of his head. He had pale green, mottled skin, and was clearly bawling at the top of his lungs.

Professor Sprout took a large plant pot from under the table and plunged the Mandrake into it, burying him in dark, damp compost until only the tufted leaves were visible. Professor Sprout dusted off her hands, gave them all the thumbs-up, and removed her own earmuffs.

"As our Mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet," she said calmly as though she'd just done nothing more exciting than water a begonia. "However, they *will* knock you out for several

hours, and as I'm sure none of you want to miss your first day back, make sure your earmuffs are securely in place while you work. I will attract your attention when it is time to pack up.

"Four to a tray — there is a large supply of pots here — compost in the sacks over there — and be careful of the Venomous Tentacula, it's teething."

She gave a sharp slap to a spiky, dark red plant as she spoke, making it draw in the long feelers that had been inching sneakily over her shoulder.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were joined at their tray by a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy Harry knew by sight but had never spoken to.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," he said brightly, shaking Harry by the hand. "Know who you are, of course, the famous Harry Potter. . . . And you're Hermione Granger — always top in everything" (Hermione beamed as she had her hand shaken too) "— and Ron Weasley. Wasn't that your flying car?"

Ron didn't smile. The Howler was obviously still on his mind.

"That Lockhart's something, isn't he?" said Justin happily as they began filling their plant pots with dragon dung compost. "Awfully brave chap. Have you read his books? I'd have died of fear if I'd been cornered in a telephone booth by a werewolf, but he stayed cool and — zap — just *fantastic*."

"My name was down for Eton, you know. I can't tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, Mother was slightly disappointed, but since I made her read Lockhart's books I think she's begun to see how useful it'll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family. . . ."

After that they didn't have much chance to talk. Their earmuffs were back on and they needed to concentrate on the Mandrakes. Professor Sprout had made it look extremely easy, but it wasn't. The Mandrakes didn't like coming out of the earth, but didn't seem to want to go back into it either. They squirmed, kicked, flailed their sharp little fists, and gnashed their teeth; Harry spent ten whole minutes trying to squash a particularly fat one into a pot.

By the end of the class, Harry, like everyone else, was sweaty, aching, and covered in earth. Everyone traipsed back to the castle for a quick wash and then the Gryffindors hurried off to Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall's classes were always hard work, but today was especially difficult. Everything Harry had learned last year seemed to have leaked out of his head during the summer. He was supposed to be turning a beetle into a button, but all he managed to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as it scuttled over the desktop avoiding his wand.

Ron was having far worse problems. He had patched up his wand with some borrowed Spellotape, but it seemed to be damaged beyond repair. It kept crackling and sparking at odd moments, and every time Ron tried to transfigure his beetle it engulfed him in thick gray smoke that smelled of rotten eggs. Unable to see what he was doing, Ron accidentally squashed his beetle with his elbow and had to ask for a new one. Professor McGonagall wasn't pleased.

Harry was relieved to hear the lunch bell. His brain felt like a wrung sponge. Everyone filed out of the classroom except him and Ron, who was whacking his wand furiously on the desk.

“Stupid — useless — thing —”

“Write home for another one,” Harry suggested as the wand let off a volley of bangs like a firecracker.

“Oh, yeah, and get another Howler back,” said Ron, stuffing the now hissing wand into his bag. “‘*It’s your own fault your wand got snapped* —’”

They went down to lunch, where Ron’s mood was not improved by Hermione’s showing them the handful of perfect coat buttons she had produced in Transfiguration.

“What’ve we got this afternoon?” said Harry, hastily changing the subject.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione at once.

“*Why*,” demanded Ron, seizing her schedule, “have you outlined all Lockhart’s lessons in little hearts?”

Hermione snatched the schedule back, blushing furiously.

They finished lunch and went outside into the overcast courtyard. Hermione sat down on a stone step and buried her nose in *Voyages with Vampires* again. Harry and Ron stood talking about Quidditch for several minutes before Harry became aware that he was being closely watched. Looking up, he saw the very small, mousy-haired boy he’d seen trying on the Sorting Hat last night staring at Harry as though transfixed. He was clutching what looked like an ordinary Muggle camera, and the moment Harry looked at him, he went bright red.

“All right, Harry? I’m — I’m Colin Creevey,” he said breathlessly, taking a tentative step forward. “I’m in Gryffindor, too. D’you think — would it be all right if — can I have a picture?” he said, raising the camera hopefully.

“A picture?” Harry repeated blankly.

“So I can prove I’ve met you,” said Colin Creevey eagerly, edging further forward. “I know all about you. Everyone’s told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you’ve still got a lightning scar on your forehead” (his eyes raked Harry’s hairline) “and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures’ll *move*.” Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and said, “It’s *amazing* here, isn’t it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad’s a milkman, he couldn’t believe it either. So I’m taking loads of pictures to send home to him. And it’d be really good if I had one of you” — he looked imploringly at Harry — “maybe your friend could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?”

“*Signed photos?* You’re giving out *signed photos*, Potter?”

Loud and scathing, Draco Malfoy’s voice echoed around the courtyard. He had stopped right behind Colin, flanked, as he always was at Hogwarts, by his large and thuggish cronies, Crabbe and Goyle.

“Everyone line up!” Malfoy roared to the crowd. “Harry Potter’s giving out signed photos!”

“No, I’m not,” said Harry angrily, his fists clenching. “Shut up, Malfoy.”

“You’re just jealous,” piped up Colin, whose entire body was about as thick as Crabbe’s neck.

“*Jealous?*” said Malfoy, who didn’t need to shout anymore: Half the courtyard was listening in. “Of what? I don’t want a foul scar

right across my head, thanks. I don't think getting your head cut open makes you that special, myself."

Crabbe and Goyle were sniggering stupidly.

"Eat slugs, Malfoy," said Ron angrily. Crabbe stopped laughing and started rubbing his knuckles in a menacing way.

"Be careful, Weasley," sneered Malfoy. "You don't want to start any trouble or your mummy'll have to come and take you away from school." He put on a shrill, piercing voice. "*'If you put another toe out of line'—*"

A knot of Slytherin fifth years nearby laughed loudly at this.

"Weasley would like a signed photo, Potter," smirked Malfoy. "It'd be worth more than his family's whole house —"

Ron whipped out his Spellotaped wand, but Hermione shut *Voyages with Vampires* with a snap and whispered, "Look out!"

"What's all this, what's all this?" Gilderoy Lockhart was striding toward them, his turquoise robes swirling behind him. "Who's giving out signed photos?"

Harry started to speak but he was cut short as Lockhart flung an arm around his shoulders and thundered jovially, "Shouldn't have asked! We meet again, Harry!"

Pinned to Lockhart's side and burning with humiliation, Harry saw Malfoy slide smirking back into the crowd.

"Come on then, Mr. Creevey," said Lockhart, beaming at Colin. "A double portrait, can't do better than that, and we'll *both* sign it for you."

Colin fumbled for his camera and took the picture as the bell rang behind them, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

“Off you go, move along there,” Lockhart called to the crowd, and he set off back to the castle with Harry, who was wishing he knew a good Vanishing Spell, still clasped to his side.

“A word to the wise, Harry,” said Lockhart paternally as they entered the building through a side door. “I covered up for you back there with young Creevey — if he was photographing me, too, your schoolmates won’t think you’re setting yourself up so much. . . .”

Deaf to Harry’s stammers, Lockhart swept him down a corridor lined with staring students and up a staircase.

“Let me just say that handing out signed pictures at this stage of your career isn’t sensible — looks a tad bigheaded, Harry, to be frank. There may well come a time when, like me, you’ll need to keep a stack handy wherever you go, but” — he gave a little chortle — “I don’t think you’re quite there yet.”

They had reached Lockhart’s classroom and he let Harry go at last. Harry yanked his robes straight and headed for a seat at the very back of the class, where he busied himself with piling all seven of Lockhart’s books in front of him, so that he could avoid looking at the real thing.

The rest of the class came clattering in, and Ron and Hermione sat down on either side of Harry.

“You could’ve fried an egg on your face,” said Ron. “You’d better hope Creevey doesn’t meet Ginny, or they’ll be starting a Harry Potter fan club.”

“Shut up,” snapped Harry. The last thing he needed was for Lockhart to hear the phrase “Harry Potter fan club.”

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat

loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville Longbottom's copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming-Smile Award — but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by *smiling* at her!"

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books — well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about — just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in —"

When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes — start — *now!*"

Harry looked down at his paper and read:

1. *What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?*
2. *What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?*
3. *What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?*

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:

54. *When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?*

Half an hour later, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through them in front of the class.

“Tut, tut — hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in *Year with the Yeti*. And a few of you need to read *Wanderings with Werewolves* more carefully — I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples — though I wouldn’t say no to a large bottle of Ogden’s Old Firewhisky!”

He gave them another roguish wink. Ron was now staring at Lockhart with an expression of disbelief on his face; Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were sitting in front, were shaking with silent laughter. Hermione, on the other hand, was listening to Lockhart with rapt attention and gave a start when he mentioned her name.

“... but Miss Hermione Granger knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions — good girl! In fact” — he flipped her paper over — “full marks! Where is Miss Hermione Granger?”

Hermione raised a trembling hand.

“Excellent!” beamed Lockhart. “Quite excellent! Take ten points for Gryffindor! And so — to business —”

He bent down behind his desk and lifted a large, covered cage onto it.

“Now — be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you

whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm.”

In spite of himself, Harry leaned around his pile of books for a better look at the cage. Lockhart placed a hand on the cover. Dean and Seamus had stopped laughing now. Neville was cowering in his front row seat.

“I must ask you not to scream,” said Lockhart in a low voice. “It might provoke them.”

As the whole class held its breath, Lockhart whipped off the cover.

“Yes,” he said dramatically. “*Freshly caught Cornish pixies.*”

Seamus Finnigan couldn’t control himself. He let out a snort of laughter that even Lockhart couldn’t mistake for a scream of terror.

“Yes?” He smiled at Seamus.

“Well, they’re not — they’re not very — *dangerous*, are they?” Seamus choked.

“Don’t be so sure!” said Lockhart, wagging a finger annoyingly at Seamus. “Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!”

The pixies were electric blue and about eight inches high, with pointed faces and voices so shrill it was like listening to a lot of budgies arguing. The moment the cover had been removed, they had started jabbering and rocketing around, rattling the bars and making bizarre faces at the people nearest them.

“Right, then,” Lockhart said loudly. “Let’s see what you make of them!” And he opened the cage.

It was pandemonium. The pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air. Several shot straight through the window, showering the back row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the classroom

more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and papers, tore pictures from the walls, upended the wastebasket, grabbed bags and books and threw them out of the smashed window; within minutes, half the class was sheltering under desks and Neville was swinging from the iron chandelier in the ceiling.

“Come on now — round them up, round them up, they’re only pixies,” Lockhart shouted.

He rolled up his sleeves, brandished his wand, and bellowed, “*Peskipiksi Pesternomi!*”

It had absolutely no effect; one of the pixies seized his wand and threw it out of the window, too. Lockhart gulped and dived under his own desk, narrowly avoiding being squashed by Neville, who fell a second later as the chandelier gave way.

The bell rang and there was a mad rush toward the exit. In the relative calm that followed, Lockhart straightened up, caught sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were almost at the door, and said, “Well, I’ll ask you three to just nip the rest of them back into their cage.” He swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him.

“Can you *believe* him?” roared Ron as one of the remaining pixies bit him painfully on the ear.

“He just wants to give us some hands-on experience,” said Hermione, immobilizing two pixies at once with a clever Freezing Charm and stuffing them back into their cage.

“*Hands on?*” said Harry, who was trying to grab a pixie dancing out of reach with its tongue out. “Hermione, he didn’t have a clue what he was doing —”

“Rubbish,” said Hermione. “You’ve read his books — look at all those amazing things he’s done —”

“He *says* he’s done,” Ron muttered.

Gilderoy Lockhart

Die volgende dag glimlag Harry skaars een keer. Reeds tydens ontbyt in die Groot Saal begin dinge al skeef loop. Die vier lang tafels onder die betowerde plafon (vandag 'n vaal, bewolkte grys) is gelaai met bakke vol pap, borde vol kippers, berge roosterbrood en skottels vol spek en eiers. Harry en Ron gaan sit by die Griffindor-tafel langs Hermien wie se eksemplaar van *Op Vakansie met Vampiere* oop teen 'n melkbeker staan. Daar is 'n effense styfheid in die manier waarop sy "Môre" sê, wat Harry deeglik laat verstaan dat sy hul manier van reis glad nie goedkeur nie. Neville Loggerenberg groet hulle egter vrolik. Neville het 'n ronde gesig en is 'n ware ongeluksvoël met die slegste geheue van al die mense wat Harry ken.

"Die pos moet enige oomblik kom – ek dink my ouma gaan 'n paar goed stuur wat ek by die huis vergeet het."

Harry het net begin om sy pap te eet toe 'n geruis van vlerke skielik gehoor word en 'n stuk of honderd uile by die vensters instroom, deur die saal sirkel en briewe en pakkies op die geselsende mense laat val. 'n Groot, bulterige pakkie bons van Neville se kop af en 'n oomblik later plons iets groots en grys in Hermien se beker en spat almal vol melk en vere.

"*Errol!*" sê Ron en lig die deurdrenkte uil uit aan sy pote. Errol slaan neer, heeltemal katswink, en lê op die tafel met sy bene in die lug en 'n klam rooi koevert in sy snawel.

"O, nee –" sê Ron en snak na asem.

"Dis alles reg, hy lewe nog," sê Hermien en druk-druk Errol versigtig met een vinger.

"Dis nie dit nie – dis *dit*."

Ron wys na die rooi koevert. Vir Harry lyk dit doodgewoon, maar sowel Ron as Neville lyk asof hulle verwag dat dit enige oomblik gaan ontplof.

"Wat makeer?" vra Harry.

"Sy – sy't vir my 'n Skeller gestuur," sê Ron floutjies.

"Jy moet dit oopmaak, Ron," sê Neville in 'n gedempte fluisterstem.

“Dit word net erger as jy dit nie doen nie. My ouma het een keer vir my ren gestuur en ek het dit gelos en –” hy sluk, “dit was aaklig.”

Harry staar van hul verskrikte gesigte na die rooi koevert.

“Wat is ’n Skeller?” vra hy.

Maar Ron se oë is vasgenaël op die brief wat nou in die hoekies begin rook.

“Maak dit oop,” sê Neville dringend. “Dis oor binne ’n paar minute . . .”

Ron steek ’n bewende hand uit, haal die brief versigtig uit Errol se snawel en sny dit oop. Neville druk sy vingers in sy ore. ’n Breukdeel van ’n sekonde later weet Harry hoekom. Eers dink hy die brief *het* ontplof, want ’n gebrul vul die groot saal sodat wolke stof uit die plafon op hulle neersif.

“... STEEL DIE MOTOR, DIT SAL MY GLAD NIE VERBAAS HET AS HULLE JOU GESKORS HET NIE, WAG NET TOT EK JOU IN DIE HANDE KRY, JY’T SEKER NIE EEN KEER GEDINK WAARDEUR EK EN JOU PA IS TOE ONS TERUGGAAN EN SIEN DIS WEG NIE . . .”

Mev. Weasley se gille, ’n honderd keer harder as normaalweg, laat die borde en die messegoed op die tafels ratel en weergalm oorverdowend van die klipmure af. Regdeur die saal draai die mense om in hul stoele om te sien wie die Skeller gekry het en Ron sak so laag af in sy stoel dat net sy vuurrooi voorkop gesien kan word.

“... BRIEF VAN DOMPELDORIUS LAAS NAG, EK DAG JOU PA GAAN DOOD VAN SKAAMTE, HET JOU NIE GROOTGEMAAK OM SULKE DINGE TE DOEN NIE, JY EN HARRY KON ALBEI MORSDOOD GEWEES HET . . .”

Harry het gewonder wanneer sy naam genoem gaan word. Hy probeer hard om te lyk asof hy die stem, wat sy oortrommels laat klop, glad nie kan hoor nie.

“... ABSOLUUT GESKOK, DAAR’S ’N HANGENDE ONDERSOEK BY JOU PA SE WERK, DIS ALLES JOU SKULD. AS JY NOG EEN VOET VERKEERD NEERSIT, KOM JY REGUIT HUIS TOE.”

’n Dawerende stilte volg. Die rooi koevert wat uit Ron se hand geval het, gaan in vlamme op en krul weg in as. Harry en Ron is verbysterd. Dis of ’n fratsgolf oor hulle gespoel het. ’n Paar mense lag en stadigaan begin almal weer onder mekaar praat.

Hermien slaan *Op Vakansie met Vampiere* toe en kyk af op Ron se kop.

“Wel, ek weet nie wat jy nou eintlik verwag het nie, Ron, maar jy –”

“Moet net nie vir my sê ek het dit verdien nie,” jak Ron haar af.

Harry stoot sy pap eenkant toe. Sy maag brand, so skuldig voel hy. Mnr. Weasley is in die moeilikheid by die werk en dit na alles wat mnr. en mev. Weasley die somer vir hom gedoen het . . .

Daar is egter nie tyd om hieroor te tob nie. Professor McGonagall stap langs die Griffindor-tafel af en deel klasroosters uit. Harry neem syne en

sien dat hulle heel eerste 'n dubbelperiode Herbologie saam met die Hoesenproesers het.

Harry, Ron en Hermien stap saam uit by die kasteel, verby die groentetuin na die kweekhuise waar die towerplante gehou word. Die Skeller het een goeie gevolg gehad. Dit lyk of Hermien dink hulle is genoeg gestraf, want sy is nou weer heeltemal vriendelik.

Toe hulle by die kweekhuise kom, sien hulle dat die res van die klas buite op professor Spruit staan en wag. Harry, Ron en Hermien het skaars by hulle aangesluit of sy kom saam met Gilderoy Lockhart oor die grasperk aangestap. Professor Spruit se arms is vol verbande en dis met 'n bykomende skuldgevoel dat Harry in die verte sien dat verskeie van die Woelige Wilg se takke in hangverbande is.

Professor Spruit is 'n klein, gesette heksie wat 'n gelapte hoed oor haar woeste bos hare dra; haar klere is gewoonlik vol grond en haar naels sal tant Petunia 'n toeval laat kry. Gilderoy Lockhart is egter onberispelik uitgevat in 'n vloeiende turkoois kleed en sy goue hare skitter onder 'n perfek geplaaste turkoois hoed met 'n goue randjie.

"Hallo! Hallo!" roep Lockhart uit en glimlag stralend vir die studente wat daar staan en wag. "Het net gou vir professor Spruit gewys wat die regte manier is om 'n Woelige Wilg te dokter! Maar ek wil nie hê julle moet die indruk kry dat ek beter in Herbologie is as sy nie! Ek was net gelukkig om etlike eksotiese plante tydens my reise te leer ken . . ."

"Kweekhuis Drie vandag, mense!" sê professor Spruit, wat goed omgekrap lyk – glad nie haar gewone sonnige self nie.

Daar is 'n gemurmer van belangstelling. Hulle het tevore nog net in Kweekhuis Een gewerk – die interessanter en gevaarliker plante word in Kweekhuis Drie gehou. Professor Spruit haal 'n groot sleutel van haar gordel af en sluit die deur oop. Harry kry die geur van klam grond en bemesting, gemeng met die swaar parfuim van groot, sambreelagtige blomme wat van die plafon hang. Hy is op die punt om agter Ron en Hermien aan te stap toe Lockhart se hand uitskiet.

"Harry! Ek moet met jou praat – jy gee seker nie om as hy 'n minuut of wat laat is nie, of hoe, professor Spruit?"

Die misnoegde blik in professor Spruit se oë spreek boekdele, maar Lockhart sê bloot "Dis hy," en maak die kweekhuis se deur in haar gesig toe.

"Harry," sê Lockhart en sy groot wit tande vang die sonlig terwyl hy sy kop heen en weer skud. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

Harry is so uit die veld geslaan, hy kan nie 'n woord sê nie.

"Toe ek hoor – wel, dis natuurlik alles my skuld. Kan myself skop."

Harry het nie 'n idee waarvan hy praat nie. Hy is op die punt om dit te sê toe Lockhart voortgaan. "Weet nie wanneer laas ek meer geskok was nie. Om in 'n motor tot by Hogwarts te vlieg! Ek het natuurlik dadelik

gewet hoekom jy dit gedoen het. Staan soos 'n paal bo water. Harry, Harry, Harry."

Dis net ongelooflik hoe hy elkeen van daardie skitterwit tande kan wys, selfs al sê hy nie 'n woord nie.

"Ek het jou 'n voorsmakie gegee van hoe dit is om beroemd te wees, nè?" sê Lockhart. "Jou lus gemaak. Jy was op die voorblad van die koerant saam met my en jy kon nie wag om dit weer te doen nie."

"O – nee, professor, sien –"

"Harry, Harry, Harry," sê Lockhart en vat sy skouer vas. "Ek verstaan. Dis natuurlik om meer te wil hê na jy daardie eerste smakie gehad het – en ek verwyt myself daarvoor, dit kon nie anders as om jou 'n groot kop te gee nie – maar luister, jonge man, jy kan nie in *motors* rondvlieg om opgelet te word nie. Bedaar, vat dit kalm. Daar is hope tyd vir sulke dinge wanneer jy ouer is. Ja, ja, ek weet wat jy dink! 'Dis maklik vir hom om te praat, hy's reeds 'n wêreldberoemde towenaar!' Maar toe ek twaalf was, was ek net so onbekend soos jy. Om die waarheid te sê, ek was dalk nog minder bekend as jy! Ek bedoel, daar is darem so hier en daar iemand wat al van jou gehoor het, nie waar nie? Daardie gedoente met *Jy-Weet-Wie!*" Hy kyk na die litteken in die vorm van 'n weerligstraal op Harry se voorkop. "Ek weet, ek weet, dis nie dieselfde as om *Heks en Haard* se Mees-Sjarmante-Glimlag-toekenning vyf keer na mekaar te verower, soos ek gedoen het nie – maar dis 'n *begin*, Harry, dis 'n *begin*."

Hy knipoog hartlik vir Harry en stap aan. Vir 'n paar oomblikke kan Harry nie roer nie, toe onthou hy dat hy eintlik in die kweekhuis moet wees en hy maak die deur oop en gaan in.

Professor Spruit staan agter 'n lessenaar in die middel van die kweekhuis. 'n Stuk of twintig oorskutte in 'n verskeidenheid kleure lê op die tafel. Toe Harry tussen Ron en Hermien gaan staan, sê sy, "Vandag gaan ons alruine oorplant. Kan enigiemand my vertel wat die eienskappe van hierdie plant is?"

Tot niemand se verbasing nie, is Hermien se hand eerste in die lug.

"Alruine, of mandragora, is 'n kragtige versterkmiddel." Soos gewoonlik klink dit asof Hermien die hele handboek ingesluk het. "Dit word gebruik om mense wat getransfigureer is tot hul oorspronklike toestand te herstel."

"Uitstekend. Tien punte vir Griffindor," sê professor Spruit. "Die alruin is 'n noodsaaklike bestanddeel van die meeste teenmiddels. Dit is egter ook uiters gevaarlik. Kan iemand sê hoekom?"

Hermien se hand mis Harry se bril net-net toe dit weer eens die lug in skiet.

"Die kreet van die alruin is dodelik vir enigeen wat dit hoor," sê sy pront.

"Presies. Nog tien punte," sê professor Spruit. "Die alruine wat ons hier het, is nog besonder jonk."

Terwyl sy praat, wys sy na 'n ry groterige saailingkissies en almal skui-fel nader om beter te kan sien. Sowat eenhonderd gepluimde plante, al-mal perserig groen van kleur, groei in netjiese rye daarin. Vir Harry lyk hulle na niks besonders nie. Hy het ook nie 'n idee wat Hermien bedoel met die "kreet" van die alruin nie.

"Elkeen moet 'n paar oorskutte opsit," sê professor Spruit.

Daar is so ietwat van 'n los gemaal terwyl almal probeer om oorskutte in die hande te kry wat nie pienk en donsig is nie.

"Wanneer ek sê julle moet dit opsit, moet julle seker maak dat jul ore behoorlik bedek is," sê professor Spruit. "Sodra dit veilig is om dit af te haal, sal ek die teken gee. Goed – oorskutte op."

Harry klap die oorskutte oor sy ore. Hulle sny alle klank heeltemal uit. Professor Spruit sit 'n paar donsige pienk oorskutte oor haar eie ore, rol die moue van haar kleed op, gryp een van die plante stewig aan 'n pluim en trek hard.

Van pure verbasing snak Harry na asem, maar niemand kan dit hoor nie.

Pleks van wortels verskyn 'n klein, modderige en besonder lelike ba-batjie bo die grond. Blare groei bo uit sy kop. Hy het 'n bleekgroen, skim-melrige vel en dis duidelik dat hy skreeu vir al wat hy werd is.

Professor Spruit haal 'n groterige pot onder die tafel uit, druk die al-ruin daarin en pak hom toe met donker, klam kompos tot 'n mens net die blare kan sien. Toe stof sy haar hande af, gee haar die teken en haal haar eie oorskutte af.

"Aangesien ons alruine nog blote saalinge is, is hul krete nog nie dodelik nie," sê sy koeltjies, asof sy niks meer opwindends gedoen het as om begonias nat te gooi nie. "Tog sal jy vir etlike ure bewusteloos wees. Ek is seker nie een van julle wil jul eerste skooldag mis nie, maak dus seker dat julle oorskutte goed in posisie is terwyl julle werk. Ek sal julle aandag trek wanneer dit tyd is om op te pak.

"Vier mense per saailingkissie – hier oorkant is 'n groot verskeiden-heid potte – kompos in die sakke daar oorkant – en pasop vir die Giftige Tentakula, dis besig om tande te sny."

Sommerso in die praat gee sy 'n stekelrige, donkerrooi plant 'n taai klap en die lang voelers wat soos slange oor haar skouer begin krul het, trek dadelik terug.

'n Seun met krullerige hare wat in Hoesenproes is, sluit by Harry, Ron en Hermien aan. Harry ken hom van sien, maar hy het nog nooit met hom gepraat nie.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," sê die seun vrolik en skud Harry se hand. "Weet natuurlik wie jy is, die beroemde Harry Potter . . . en jy is Hermien la Grange – staan altyd eerste in alles . . ." (Hermien straal en haar hand word ook geskud) "en Ron Weasley. Was dit jou vlieënde kar?"

Ron glimlag nie. Die Skeller is duidelik nog vars in sy geheue.

“Daardie Lockhart is iets anders, nè?” sê Justin opgewek terwyl hulle hul potte vol draakmiskompos skep. “Verskriklik dapper. Het julle sy boeke gelees? Ek sal doodgaan as ’n weerwolf my in ’n telefoonhokkie moet vaskeer, maar hy’t net kalm gebly en – kazamma – dis net *fantasties*.”

“My naam was op vir Eton, weet julle, maar ek is so bly dat ek hier is. My ma was natuurlik ’n bietjie teleurgesteld, maar toe gee ek vir haar Lockhart se boeke om te lees en nou dink sy ook dis ’n goeie idee om ’n opgeleide towenaar in die familie te hê . . .”

Daarna is daar nie tyd vir praat nie. Die oorskutte is terug in posisie en hulle moet op die alruine konsentreer. Professor Spruit het dit baie maklik laat lyk, maar dit is glad nie so nie. Die alruine hou niks daarvan om uitgetrek te word nie, maar wil ook nie weer teruggeplant word nie. Hulle kriewel en skop en slaan met hul skerp klein vuisies en kners hulle tande; Harry sukkel langer as tien minute om ’n besonder vettetjie in ’n pot te druk.

Teen die einde van die klas is Harry, nes al die ander, sweterig, seer en vol grond. Hulle slof terug kasteel toe vir ’n vinnige stort en toe laat vat die Griffindors na die Transfigurasie-klas.

Professor McGonagall se klasse is altyd harde werk, maar vandag is dit ekstra moeilik. Dis of alles wat Harry die vorige jaar geleer het tydens die somervakansie uit sy brein gelek het. Hy is veronderstel om ’n kwer in ’n knoop te verander, maar al wat hy regkry, is om die kwer oefening te gee. Dit skarrel rond oor die lessenaar, buite bereik van sy towerstaf.

Ron sukkel nog meer. Hy het sy towerstaf met geleende Toorgompapier aanmekaar geplak, maar dit lyk of die skade permanent is. Dit klap en kraak en maak vonke op verkeerde tye en elke keer dat Ron sy kwer probeer transfigureer, warrel ’n wolk dik grys rook, wat na vrot eiers ruik, oor hom. Hy kan skaars sien wat hy doen, en druk sy kwer per ongeluk met sy elmboog plat. Professor McGonagall is glad nie in haar skik toe hy ’n ander een vra nie.

Harry is verlig toe die klok vir middagete lui. Sy brein voel soos ’n uitgedroogde spons. Almal loop buitentoe behalwe hy en Ron, wat ergerlik met sy towerstaf op die tafel slaan.

“Onnosele . . . hopelose . . . ding . . .”

“Skryf huis toe en vra ’n ander een,” stel Harry voor toe die towerstaf ’n rits knalle soos klappers los.

“O ja, en kry nog ’n Skeller,” sê Ron en steek die sissende staf in sy tas. “Dis jou eie skuld dat jou towerstaf gebreek het –”

Hulle stap eetsaal toe, waar Ron se bui glad nie verbeter toe Hermien die hand vol perfekte knope wys wat sy in die Transfigurasie-klas voortgebring het nie.

“Wat het ons vanmiddag?” vra Harry gou, net om die onderwerp te verander.

“Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste,” sê Hermien dadelik.

“*Hoekom*,” wil Ron weet en hy gryp haar klasrooster, “het jy rooi harte om al Lockhart se klasse geteken?”

Hermien pluk die rooster uit sy hande en bloos bloedrooi.

Na middagete gaan hulle buitentoe na die bedekte binnehof. Hermien gaan sit op ’n kliptrappie en bêre haar neus weer eens in *Op Vakansie met Vampiere*. Harry en Ron staan ’n rukkie oor Kwiddiek en praat toe Harry agterkom dat iemand hom stip dophou. Toe hy opkyk, sien hy die klein seuntjie met die muisvaal hare wat hy die vorige aand die Sorteelhoed sien aanpas het. Hy staar na Harry asof hy betower is. Hy hou iets vas wat soos ’n gewone Moggelkamera lyk, en die oomblik toe Harry sy oog vang, bloos hy bloedrooi.

“Jammer, Harry? Ek – ek is Colin Creevey,” sê hy skoon uitasem en tree huiwerig nader. “Ek is ook in Griffindor. Dink jy – sal jy omgee as – kan ek ’n foto van jou neem?” vra hy hoopvol en lig die kamera.

“’n Foto?” herhaal Harry verbaas.

“Sodat ek kan bewys dat ek jou ontmoet het,” sê Colin Creevey gretig en skuif verder vorentoe. “Ek weet alles van jou af. Almal het my vertel. Oor hoe jy bly leef het toe Jy-Weet-Wie jou probeer doodmaak het en hoe hy verdwyn het en hoe jy nog steeds die weerlig-litteken op jou voorkop het,” (sy oë speel oor Harry se kuif) “en ’n seun in my slaapsaal het gesê as ek die film in die regte towermiddel ontwikkel, sal die foto’s beweeg.” Colin trek sy asem hortend in, so opgewonde is hy, en sê, “Dis fantasties hier, nie waar nie? Ek het nooit geweet al die snaakse goed wat ek doen, is toor nie, tot ek die brief van Hogwarts af gekry het. My pa is ’n melkman, hy kon dit ook nie glo nie. Dus neem ek nou tonne foto’s om vir hom te stuur. En dit sal wonderlik wees as ek een van jou ook kan hê –” hy kyk smekend na Harry, “– dalk kan jou vriend dit neem, dan staan ek langs jou. En sal jy dit teken?”

“Getekende foto’s? So jy onderteken foto’s, Potter?”

Draco Malfoy se stem weergalm oor die binnehof, hard en welluidend. Hy staan reg agter Colin met sy twee uitgevrete, boefagtige maters, Krabbe en Goliath, soos altyd aan weerskante van hom.

“Kom, mense, kom staan tou!” bulder Malfoy oor die koppe. “Harry Potter teken foto’s!”

“Nee, dit lieg jy,” sê Harry vererg en bal sy vuiste. “Hou jou snater, Malfoy.”

“Jy’s net jaloers,” skree Colin, wie se hele lyf omtrent so dik soos Krabbe se nek is.

“Jaloers?” sê Malfoy, wat nou nie meer hoef te skree nie, want goed die helfte van die binnehof luister reeds na wat aangaan. “Waarop nogal? Ek

wil nie 'n stinkende litteken op my voorkop hê nie, dankie. Ek dink regtig nie dit maak jou so danig wonderlik as jou kop oopgesny was nie.”

Krabbe en Goliat giggel op hul onnosel manier.

“Gaan eet slakke, Malfoy,” sê Ron vererg. Krabbe hou op lag en vryf sy knopperige kneukels dreigend.

“Lig loop, Weasley,” snou Malfoy hom kwaai toe, “Jy wil nie in die moeilikheid kom nie, of jou mammi sal jou van die skool af kom wegvat.” Hy skakel 'n skril stemmetjie aan. “As jy nog een voet verkeerd neersit –”

'n Groepie Slibberin-vyfdejaars daar naby lag luidkeels toe hulle dit hoor.

“Weasley sal hou van 'n getekende foto, Potter,” sê Malfoy en grinnik. “Dit sal meer werd wees as hulle familie se hele huis.”

Ron ruk sy vasgeplakte towerstaf uit, maar Hermien klap *Op Vakansie met Vampiere* toe en fluister, “Pas op!”

“En wat's hier aan die gang, wat's aan die gang?” Gilderoy Lockhart kom so vinnig aangestryk dat sy turkoois mantel agter hom wapper. “Wie deel ondertekende foto's uit?”

Harry wil nog iets sê, maar word kortgeknip deur Lockhart wat sy arm om sy skouers slaan en plesierig uitroep, “Waarom *vra* ek nog? Ons ontmoet nogeens, Harry!”

Vasgedruk teen Lockhart se sy en vuurwarm van vernedering, sien Harry hoe Malfoy grynslaggend in die skare verdwyn.

“Kom, kom, mnr. Creevey,” sê Lockhart stralend vir Colin. “'n Dubbele foto, beter kan jy nie kry nie, en *al twee* van ons sal dit teken.”

Colin grabbel na sy kamera en neem die foto net toe die klok agter hulle lui vir die begin van die middag se klasse.

“Weg is julle, beweeg, beweeg,” roep Lockhart vir die skare en sit af kasteel toe met Harry, wat wens hy ken 'n goeie verdwyn-towerspel, nog steeds styf teen hom gedruk.

“Net 'n woordjie van wysheid, Harry,” sê Lockhart vaderlik toe hulle die gebou by 'n sydeur ingaan. “Ek het jou daar kom uithelp met jong Creevey – as hy vir my *saam* met jou afneem, sal jou skoolmaats nie sommer dink dis net omdat jy in die kalklig wil wees nie . . .”

Doof vir Harry se gestamel, swiep Lockhart hom af in 'n gang vol starende studente en op met die trappe.

“Maar ek moet dit duidelik maak dat om getekende foto's uit te deel in hierdie vroeë stadium van jou loopbaan, werklik nie verstandig is nie – dit lyk of jy so ietwat van 'n groot kop het, Harry, om nou eerlik te wees. Daar kan wel 'n tyd kom wanneer jy, soos ek, altyd 'n stapel iewers byderhand moet hê, maar –” hy gee 'n laggie, “ek dink regtig nie jy is al daar nie.”

Hulle het Lockhart se klaskamer bereik en uiteindelik laat hy vir Harry

los. Harry trek sy kleed reg en mik vir 'n sitplek heel agter in die klas, waar hy al sewe Lockhart se boeke voor hom opstapel, sodat hy die ware Jakob daar voor in die klas nie hoef te sien nie.

Die res van die studente kom ingeklater en Ron en Hermien gaan sit aan weerskante van Harry.

“n Mens kon 'n eier op jou gesig bak,” sê Ron. “Jy moet hoop daardie klein Creevey loop nie vir Ginny raak nie, hulle sal 'n Harry Potter-bewonderaarsklub stig.”

“Ag, bly stil,” sis Harry. Die laaste ding wat hy nodig het, is vir Lockhart om die frase “Harry Potter-bewonderaarsklub” te hoor.

Toe die hele klas sit, maak Lockhart hard keel skoon en almal word stil. Hy steek 'n hand uit, tel Neville Loggerenberg se eksemplaar van *Toer met Trolle* op en hou dit omhoog, sodat almal sy winkende foto op die voorblad kan sien.

“Ek,” sê hy, wys daarna en knipoog ook, “Gilderoy Lockhart, Orde van Merlin, derde klas, Erelidmaatskap van die Donker Magte-verdedigingsliga en wenner van *Heks en Haard* se Mees-Sjarmante-Glimlag, vyf keer agtereenvolgens – maar dis nie waaroor ek met julle wil praat nie. Ek het nie met die Dresden Doodsbode afgereken deur vir haar te *glimlag* nie!”

Hy wag 'n rukkie dat hulle moet lag; 'n paar mense glimlag so effens.

“Ek sien julle het almal 'n volledige stel van my boeke gekoop – mooi so. Ek dink ons sal vandag met 'n klein vasvra begin. Niks om julle oor te bekommer nie – wil net kyk hoe deeglik julle jul leeswerk gedoen het en hoeveel julle ingeneem het . . .”

Nadat hy die vraestelle uitgedeel het, gaan hy terug tot voor in die klas en sê, “Julle het dertig minute. Reg – begin!”

Harry kyk af na sy papier en lees:

1. Wat is Gilderoy Lockhart se gunstelingkleur?
2. Wat is Gilderoy Lockhart se geheime ambisie?
3. Na jou mening, wat is Gilderoy Lockhart se grootste prestasie tot op datum?

Aan en aan gaan dit, oor meer as drie bladsye tot by:

54. Wanneer is Gilderoy Lockhart se verjaardag en wat sal die ideale geskenk vir hom wees?

'n Halfuur later neem Lockhart die antwoorde in en blaai vinnig daardeur.

“T-t-t – omtrent niemand het onthou dat lilapers my gunstelingkleur is nie. Ek sê dit duidelik in *Die Jaar van die Jeti*. En 'n hele paar van julle moet *Wandel met Weerwolwe* meer deeglik gaan lees – ek stel dit onom-

wonde in hoofstuk twaalf dat my ideale verjaardaggeskenk harmonie tussen alle towenaar- en nietowenaarmense sal wees – hoewel ek nie vir 'n lekker groot bottel Ogden's Old Firewhisky nee dankie sal sê nie!”

Weer knipoog hy guitig. Ron staar na Lockhart met 'n uitdrukking van ongeloof op sy gesig; Septimus Floris en Dean Thomas, wat heel voor sit, skud van die lag. Hermien luister egter met onverdeelde aandag na Lockhart en wip van die skrik toe hy haar naam noem.

“... maar mejuffrou Hermien la Grange weet dis my geheime ambisie om die wêreld van alle boosheid te bevry en om my eie reeks haarsorgmiddels te bemark – mooi so! Om die waarheid te sê –” hy draai haar vraestel om, “volpunte! Waar is juffrou Hermien la Grange?”

Hermien steek 'n bewerige hand op.

“Uitstekend!” sê Lockhart stralend, “absoluut uitstekend! Tien punte vir Griffindor! En nou, besigheid...”

Hy verdwyn agter die tafel en lig 'n groot, toegemaakte hok op die tafel.

“Nou – wees gewaarsku! Dis my plig om julle te bewapen teen die gemeenste kreature bekend aan die towerwêreld! In hierdie vertrek gaan julle van aangesig tot aangesig kom met dit wat julle die meeste vrees. Wees egter verseker dat julle heeltemal veilig is terwyl ek naby is. Al waarvoor ek vra, is dat julle kalm moet bly.”

Ten spyte van homself, leun Harry om die stapel boeke om die hok beter te kan sien. Lockhart sit 'n hand op die doek. Dean en Septimus het ophou lag. Neville krimp ineen daar in die voorste ry.

“Ek moet vra dat julle nie gil of skree nie,” sê Lockhart in 'n gedempte stem. “Dit kan hulle kwaad maak.”

Terwyl die hele klas asem ophou, pluk Lockhart die doek af.

“Siedaar,” sê hy dramaties. “*Pas gevang. Korniese kabouters.*”

Septimus Floris kan homself nie langer betuel nie. Hy snork van die lag, sodat selfs Lockhart nie kan dink dat dit 'n angskreet was nie.

“Ja?” sê hy glimlaggend vir Septimus.

“Wel, hulle is nie – hulle's nie juis baie – *gevaarlik* nie, is hulle?” wurg Septimus dit uit.

“Moenie so seker wees nie!” sê Lockhart en wikkel 'n vinger onder Septimus se neus. “Duiwelse klein goetertjies, laat ek jou vertel!”

Die kabouters is skelblou van kleur en omtrent twintig sentimeter lank, met skerp gesiggies en stemmetjies wat so skril is, hulle klink soos 'n spul parkiete wat stry. Die oomblik toe die doek afgehaal is, het hulle begin klets en op en af spring; hulle ratel die tralies en trek skewebek vir die mense wat naby hulle sit.

“Goed, dan,” sê Lockhart hard. “Kom ons kyk wat julle van hulle maak.” Hy maak die hok oop.

Chaos bars los. Die kabouters spat soos vuurpyle die wêreld vol. Twee

van hulle gryp Neville aan die ore en lig hom uit sy stoel. 'n Hele paar skiet deur die venster sodat glasskerwe oor die agterste rye trek. Die res saai verwoesting in die klaskamer, beter as wat 'n briesende renoster dit sou kon doen. Hulle gryp inkbottels en bespat die klas met ink, skeur boeke aan flenters, ruk prente van die mure af en keer die snippermandjie om, smyt sakke en boeke deur die stukkende vensters; binne minute skuil die helfte van die klas onder hul banke en Neville swaai aan die kandelaar van die plafon af.

“Toe nou, vang hulle, vang hulle, dis net kabouters . . .” skreeu Lockhart.

Hy rol sy moue op, swaai sy towerstaf en bulder, “*Peskikabouteri! Pesternomi!*”

Absoluut niks gebeur nie; een van die kabouters gryp Lockhart se towerstaf en gooi dit ook deur die venster. Lockhart sluk swaar en duik onder sy lessenaar in, net betyds om te verhoed dat Neville op sy kop val toe die kandelaar uit die plafon skeur.

Die klok lui en almal storm soos besetenes na die deur. In die betreklike kalmte wat volg, kom Lockhart orent, sien vir Harry, Ron en Hermien wat so te sê by die deur is en sê, “Wel, julle drie kan die res gou-gou vang en terug in die hok sit.” Hy swiep verby hulle en maak die deur vinnig agter hom toe.

“Ek glo dit nie,” sê Ron en brul toe een van die kabouters hom pynlik aan die oor byt.

“Hy wil ons net eerstehandse ondervinding gee,” sê Hermien terwyl sy twee kabouters stokstyf laat word met 'n slim Kitsvries-towerspreuk en hulle terug in die hok stop.

“*Eerstehands?*” sê Harry terwyl hy sukkel om 'n kabouter te vang wat net-net buite bereik rondans en vir hom tong uitsteek. “Hermien, die man weet glad nie wat hy doen nie!”

“Twak,” sê Hermien. “Jy't mos sy boeke gelees – kyk net al die onge-looflike dinge wat hy al gedoen het . . .”

“Wat hy sê hy al gedoen het,” brom Ron.

CHAPTER SEVEN



MUDBLOODS AND MURMURS

Harry spent a lot of time over the next few days dodging out of sight whenever he saw Gilderoy Lockhart coming down a corridor. Harder to avoid was Colin Creevey, who seemed to have memorized Harry's schedule. Nothing seemed to give Colin a bigger thrill than to say, "All right, Harry?" six or seven times a day and hear, "Hello, Colin," back, however exasperated Harry sounded when he said it.

Hedwig was still angry with Harry about the disastrous car journey and Ron's wand was still malfunctioning, surpassing itself on

Friday morning by shooting out of Ron's hand in Charms and hitting tiny old Professor Flitwick squarely between the eyes, creating a large, throbbing green boil where it had struck. So with one thing and another, Harry was quite glad to reach the weekend. He, Ron, and Hermione were planning to visit Hagrid on Saturday morning. Harry, however, was shaken awake several hours earlier than he would have liked by Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Whassamatter?" said Harry groggily.

"Quidditch practice!" said Wood. "Come on!"

Harry squinted at the window. There was a thin mist hanging across the pink-and-gold sky. Now that he was awake, he couldn't understand how he could have slept through the racket the birds were making.

"Oliver," Harry croaked. "It's the crack of dawn."

"Exactly," said Wood. He was a tall and burly sixth year and, at the moment, his eyes were gleaming with a crazed enthusiasm. "It's part of our new training program. Come on, grab your broom, and let's go," said Wood heartily. "None of the other teams have started training yet; we're going to be first off the mark this year —"

Yawning and shivering slightly, Harry climbed out of bed and tried to find his Quidditch robes.

"Good man," said Wood. "Meet you on the field in fifteen minutes."

When he'd found his scarlet team robes and pulled on his cloak for warmth, Harry scribbled a note to Ron explaining where he'd gone and went down the spiral staircase to the common room, his Nimbus

Two Thousand on his shoulder. He had just reached the portrait hole when there was a clatter behind him and Colin Creevey came dashing down the spiral staircase, his camera swinging madly around his neck and something clutched in his hand.

“I heard someone saying your name on the stairs, Harry! Look what I’ve got here! I’ve had it developed, I wanted to show you —”

Harry looked bemusedly at the photograph Colin was brandishing under his nose.

A moving, black-and-white Lockhart was tugging hard on an arm Harry recognized as his own. He was pleased to see that his photographic self was putting up a good fight and refusing to be dragged into view. As Harry watched, Lockhart gave up and slumped, panting, against the white edge of the picture.

“Will you sign it?” said Colin eagerly.

“No,” said Harry flatly, glancing around to check that the room was really deserted. “Sorry, Colin, I’m in a hurry — Quidditch practice —”

He climbed through the portrait hole.

“Oh, wow! Wait for me! I’ve never watched a Quidditch game before!”

Colin scrambled through the hole after him.

“It’ll be really boring,” Harry said quickly, but Colin ignored him, his face shining with excitement.

“You were the youngest House player in a hundred years, weren’t you, Harry? Weren’t you?” said Colin, trotting alongside him. “You must be brilliant. I’ve never flown. Is it easy? Is that your own broom? Is that the best one there is?”

Harry didn't know how to get rid of him. It was like having an extremely talkative shadow.

"I don't really understand Quidditch," said Colin breathlessly. "Is it true there are four balls? And two of them fly around trying to knock people off their brooms?"

"Yes," said Harry heavily, resigned to explaining the complicated rules of Quidditch. "They're called Bludgers. There are two Beaters on each team who carry clubs to beat the Bludgers away from their side. Fred and George Weasley are the Gryffindor Beaters."

"And what are the other balls for?" Colin asked, tripping down a couple of steps because he was gazing open-mouthed at Harry.

"Well, the Quaffle — that's the biggish red one — is the one that scores goals. Three Chasers on each team throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through the goalposts at the end of the pitch — they're three long poles with hoops on the end."

"And the fourth ball —"

"— is the Golden Snitch," said Harry, "and it's very small, very fast, and difficult to catch. But that's what the Seeker's got to do, because a game of Quidditch doesn't end until the Snitch has been caught. And whichever team's Seeker gets the Snitch earns his team an extra hundred and fifty points."

"And *you're* the Gryffindor Seeker, aren't you?" said Colin in awe.

"Yes," said Harry as they left the castle and started across the dew-drenched grass. "And there's the Keeper, too. He guards the goalposts. That's it, really."

But Colin didn't stop questioning Harry all the way down the

sloping lawns to the Quidditch field, and Harry only shook him off when he reached the changing rooms; Colin called after him in a piping voice, "I'll go and get a good seat, Harry!" and hurried off to the stands.

The rest of the Gryffindor team were already in the changing room. Wood was the only person who looked truly awake. Fred and George Weasley were sitting, puffy-eyed and tousle-haired, next to fourth year Alicia Spinnet, who seemed to be nodding off against the wall behind her. Her fellow Chasers, Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson, were yawning side by side opposite them.

"There you are, Harry, what kept you?" said Wood briskly. "Now, I wanted a quick talk with you all before we actually get onto the field, because I spent the summer devising a whole new training program, which I really think will make all the difference. . . ."

Wood was holding up a large diagram of a Quidditch field, on which were drawn many lines, arrows, and crosses in different-colored inks. He took out his wand, tapped the board, and the arrows began to wiggle over the diagram like caterpillars. As Wood launched into a speech about his new tactics, Fred Weasley's head drooped right onto Alicia Spinnet's shoulder and he began to snore.

The first board took nearly twenty minutes to explain, but there was another board under that, and a third under that one. Harry sank into a stupor as Wood droned on and on.

"So," said Wood, at long last, jerking Harry from a wistful fantasy about what he could be eating for breakfast at this very moment up at the castle. "Is that clear? Any questions?"

"I've got a question, Oliver," said George, who had woken with a

start. “Why couldn’t you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?”

Wood wasn’t pleased.

“Now, listen here, you lot,” he said, glowering at them all. “We should have won the Quidditch Cup last year. We’re easily the best team. But unfortunately — owing to circumstances beyond our control —”

Harry shifted guiltily in his seat. He had been unconscious in the hospital wing for the final match of the previous year, meaning that Gryffindor had been a player short and had suffered their worst defeat in three hundred years.

Wood took a moment to regain control of himself. Their last defeat was clearly still torturing him.

“So this year, we train harder than ever before. . . . Okay, let’s go and put our new theories into practice!” Wood shouted, seizing his broomstick and leading the way out of the locker rooms. Stiff-legged and still yawning, his team followed.

They had been in the locker room so long that the sun was up completely now, although remnants of mist hung over the grass in the stadium. As Harry walked onto the field, he saw Ron and Hermione sitting in the stands.

“Aren’t you finished yet?” called Ron incredulously.

“Haven’t even started,” said Harry, looking jealously at the toast and marmalade Ron and Hermione had brought out of the Great Hall. “Wood’s been teaching us new moves.”

He mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. The cool morning air whipped his face, waking him far

more effectively than Wood's long talk. It felt wonderful to be back on the Quidditch field. He soared right around the stadium at full speed, racing Fred and George.

"What's that funny clicking noise?" called Fred as they hurtled around the corner.

Harry looked into the stands. Colin was sitting in one of the highest seats, his camera raised, taking picture after picture, the sound strangely magnified in the deserted stadium.

"Look this way, Harry! This way!" he cried shrilly.

"Who's that?" said Fred.

"No idea," Harry lied, putting on a spurt of speed that took him as far away as possible from Colin.

"What's going on?" said Wood, frowning, as he skimmed through the air toward them. "Why's that first year taking pictures? I don't like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program."

"He's in Gryffindor," said Harry quickly.

"And the Slytherins don't need a spy, Oliver," said George.

"What makes you say that?" said Wood testily.

"Because they're here in person," said George, pointing.

Several people in green robes were walking onto the field, broomsticks in their hands.

"I don't believe it!" Wood hissed in outrage. "I booked the field for today! We'll see about this!"

Wood shot toward the ground, landing rather harder than he meant to in his anger, staggering slightly as he dismounted. Harry, Fred, and George followed.

“Flint!” Wood bellowed at the Slytherin Captain. “This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!”

Marcus Flint was even larger than Wood. He had a look of trollish cunning on his face as he replied, “Plenty of room for all of us, Wood.”

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had come over, too. There were no girls on the Slytherin team, who stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the Gryffindors, leering to a man.

“But I booked the field!” said Wood, positively spitting with rage. “I booked it!”

“Ah,” said Flint. “But I’ve got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. ‘*I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker.*’”

“You’ve got a new Seeker?” said Wood, distracted. “Where?”

And from behind the six large figures before them came a seventh, smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. It was Draco Malfoy.

“Aren’t you Lucius Malfoy’s son?” said Fred, looking at Malfoy with dislike.

“Funny you should mention Draco’s father,” said Flint as the whole Slytherin team smiled still more broadly. “Let me show you the generous gift he’s made to the Slytherin team.”

All seven of them held out their broomsticks. Seven highly polished, brand-new handles and seven sets of fine gold lettering spelling the words *Nimbus Two Thousand and One* gleamed under the Gryffindors’ noses in the early morning sun.

“Very latest model. Only came out last month,” said Flint carelessly, flicking a speck of dust from the end of his own. “I believe it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps” — he smiled nastily at Fred and George, who were both clutching Cleansweep Fives — “sweeps the board with them.”

None of the Gryffindor team could think of anything to say for a moment. Malfoy was smirking so broadly his cold eyes were reduced to slits.

“Oh, look,” said Flint. “A field invasion.”

Ron and Hermione were crossing the grass to see what was going on.

“What’s happening?” Ron asked Harry. “Why aren’t you playing? And what’s *he* doing here?”

He was looking at Malfoy, taking in his Slytherin Quidditch robes.

“I’m the new Slytherin Seeker, Weasley,” said Malfoy, smugly. “Everyone’s just been admiring the brooms my father’s bought our team.”

Ron gaped, openmouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him.

“Good, aren’t they?” said Malfoy smoothly. “But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them.”

The Slytherin team howled with laughter.

“At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to *buy* their way in,” said Hermione sharply. “*They* got in on pure talent.”

The smug look on Malfoy's face flickered.

"No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood," he spat.

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to stop Fred and George jumping on him, Alicia shrieked, "*How dare you!*", and Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, "You'll pay for that one, Malfoy!" and pointed it furiously under Flint's arm at Malfoy's face.

A loud bang echoed around the stadium and a jet of green light shot out of the wrong end of Ron's wand, hitting him in the stomach and sending him reeling backward onto the grass.

"Ron! Ron! Are you all right?" squealed Hermione.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead he gave an almighty belch and several slugs dribbled out of his mouth onto his lap.

The Slytherin team were paralyzed with laughter. Flint was doubled up, hanging onto his new broomstick for support. Malfoy was on all fours, banging the ground with his fist. The Gryffindors were gathered around Ron, who kept belching large, glistening slugs. Nobody seemed to want to touch him.

"We'd better get him to Hagrid's, it's nearest," said Harry to Hermione, who nodded bravely, and the pair of them pulled Ron up by the arms.

"What happened, Harry? What happened? Is he ill? But you can cure him, can't you?" Colin had run down from his seat and was now dancing alongside them as they left the field. Ron gave a huge heave and more slugs dribbled down his front.

“Oooh,” said Colin, fascinated and raising his camera. “Can you hold him still, Harry?”

“Get out of the way, Colin!” said Harry angrily. He and Hermione supported Ron out of the stadium and across the grounds toward the edge of the forest.

“Nearly there, Ron,” said Hermione as the gamekeeper’s cabin came into view. “You’ll be all right in a minute — almost there —”

They were within twenty feet of Hagrid’s house when the front door opened, but it wasn’t Hagrid who emerged. Gilderoy Lockhart, wearing robes of palest mauve today, came striding out.

“Quick, behind here,” Harry hissed, dragging Ron behind a nearby bush. Hermione followed, somewhat reluctantly.

“It’s a simple matter if you know what you’re doing!” Lockhart was saying loudly to Hagrid. “If you need help, you know where I am! I’ll let you have a copy of my book. I’m surprised you haven’t already got one — I’ll sign one tonight and send it over. Well, good-bye!” And he strode away toward the castle.

Harry waited until Lockhart was out of sight, then pulled Ron out of the bush and up to Hagrid’s front door. They knocked urgently.

Hagrid appeared at once, looking very grumpy, but his expression brightened when he saw who it was.

“Bin wonderin’ when you’d come ter see me — come in, come in — thought you mighta bin Professor Lockhart back again —”

Harry and Hermione supported Ron over the threshold into the one-roomed cabin, which had an enormous bed in one corner, a fire crackling merrily in the other. Hagrid didn’t seem perturbed by Ron’s slug problem, which Harry hastily explained as he lowered Ron into

a chair.

“Better out than in,” he said cheerfully, plunking a large copper basin in front of him. “Get ’em all up, Ron.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to do except wait for it to stop,” said Hermione anxiously, watching Ron bend over the basin. “That’s a difficult curse to work at the best of times, but with a broken wand —”

Hagrid was bustling around making them tea. His boarhound, Fang, was slobbering over Harry.

“What did Lockhart want with you, Hagrid?” Harry asked, scratching Fang’s ears.

“Givin’ me advice on gettin’ kelpies out of a well,” growled Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. “Like I don’ know. An’ bangin’ on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I’ll eat my kettle.”

It was most unlike Hagrid to criticize a Hogwarts teacher, and Harry looked at him in surprise. Hermione, however, said in a voice somewhat higher than usual, “I think you’re being a bit unfair. Professor Dumbledore obviously thought he was the best man for the job —”

“He was the *on’y* man for the job,” said Hagrid, offering them a plate of treacle toffee, while Ron coughed squelchily into his basin. “An’ I mean the *on’y* one. Gettin’ very difficult ter find anyone fer the Dark Arts job. People aren’t too keen ter take it on, see. They’re startin’ ter think it’s jinxed. No one’s lasted long fer a while now. So tell me,” said Hagrid, jerking his head at Ron. “Who was he tryin’ ter

curse?”

“Malfoy called Hermione something — it must’ve been really bad, because everyone went wild.”

“It *was* bad,” said Ron hoarsely, emerging over the tabletop looking pale and sweaty. “Malfoy called her ‘Mudblood,’ Hagrid —”

Ron dived out of sight again as a fresh wave of slugs made their appearance. Hagrid looked outraged.

“He didn’!” he growled at Hermione.

“He did,” she said. “But I don’t know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course —”

“It’s about the most insulting thing he could think of,” gasped Ron, coming back up. “Mudblood’s a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born — you know, non-magic parents. There are some wizards — like Malfoy’s family — who think they’re better than everyone else because they’re what people call pure-blood.” He gave a small burp, and a single slug fell into his outstretched hand. He threw it into the basin and continued, “I mean, the rest of us know it doesn’t make any difference at all. Look at Neville Longbottom — he’s pure-blood and he can hardly stand a cauldron the right way up.”

“An’ they haven’t invented a spell our Hermione can’ do,” said Hagrid proudly, making Hermione go a brilliant shade of magenta.

“It’s a disgusting thing to call someone,” said Ron, wiping his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. “Dirty blood, see. Common blood. It’s ridiculous. Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn’t married Muggles we’d’ve died out.”

He retched and ducked out of sight again.

“Well, I don’ blame yeh fer tryin’ ter curse him, Ron,” said Hagrid

loudly over the thuds of more slugs hitting the basin. “Bu’ maybe it was a good thing yer wand backfired. ’Spect Lucius Malfoy would’ve come marchin’ up ter school if yeh’d cursed his son. Least yer not in trouble.”

Harry would have pointed out that trouble didn’t come much worse than having slugs pouring out of your mouth, but he couldn’t; Hagrid’s treacle toffee had cemented his jaws together.

“Harry,” said Hagrid abruptly as though struck by a sudden thought. “Gotta bone ter pick with yeh. I’ve heard you’ve bin givin’ out signed photos. How come I haven’t got one?”

Furious, Harry wrenched his teeth apart.

“I have *not* been giving out signed photos,” he said hotly. “If Lockhart’s still spreading that around —”

But then he saw that Hagrid was laughing.

“I’m on’y jokin’,” he said, patting Harry genially on the back and sending him face first into the table. “I knew yeh hadn’t really. I told Lockhart yeh didn’ need teh. Yer more famous than him without tryin’.”

“Bet he didn’t like that,” said Harry, sitting up and rubbing his chin.

“Don’ think he did,” said Hagrid, his eyes twinkling. “An’ then I told him I’d never read one o’ his books an’ he decided ter go. Treacle toffee, Ron?” he added as Ron reappeared.

“No thanks,” said Ron weakly. “Better not risk it.”

“Come an’ see what I’ve bin growin’,” said Hagrid as Harry and Hermione finished the last of their tea.

In the small vegetable patch behind Hagrid’s house were a dozen

of the largest pumpkins Harry had ever seen. Each was the size of a large boulder.

“Gettin’ on well, aren’t they?” said Hagrid happily. “Fer the Halloween feast . . . should be big enough by then.”

“What’ve you been feeding them?” said Harry.

Hagrid looked over his shoulder to check that they were alone.

“Well, I’ve bin givin’ them — you know — a bit o’ help —”

Harry noticed Hagrid’s flowery pink umbrella leaning against the back wall of the cabin. Harry had had reason to believe before now that this umbrella was not all it looked; in fact, he had the strong impression that Hagrid’s old school wand was concealed inside it. Hagrid wasn’t supposed to use magic. He had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, but Harry had never found out why — any mention of the matter and Hagrid would clear his throat loudly and become mysteriously deaf until the subject was changed.

“An Engorgement Charm, I suppose?” said Hermione, halfway between disapproval and amusement. “Well, you’ve done a good job on them.”

“That’s what yer little sister said,” said Hagrid, nodding at Ron. “Met her jus’ yesterday.” Hagrid looked sideways at Harry, his beard twitching. “Said she was jus’ lookin’ round the grounds, but I reckon she was hopin’ she might run inter someone else at my house.” He winked at Harry. “If yeh ask me, *she* wouldn’t say no ter a signed —”

“Oh, shut up,” said Harry. Ron snorted with laughter and the ground was sprayed with slugs.

“Watch it!” Hagrid roared, pulling Ron away from his precious pumpkins.

It was nearly lunchtime and as Harry had only had one bit of treacle toffee since dawn, he was keen to go back to school to eat. They said good-bye to Hagrid and walked back up to the castle, Ron hiccupping occasionally, but only bringing up two very small slugs.

They had barely set foot in the cool entrance hall when a voice rang out, “There you are, Potter — Weasley.” Professor McGonagall was walking toward them, looking stern. “You will both do your detentions this evening.”

“What’re we doing, Professor?” said Ron, nervously suppressing a burp.

“*You* will be polishing the silver in the trophy room with Mr. Filch,” said Professor McGonagall. “And no magic, Weasley — elbow grease.”

Ron gulped. Argus Filch, the caretaker, was loathed by every student in the school.

“And you, Potter, will be helping Professor Lockhart answer his fan mail,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Oh n — Professor, can’t I go and do the trophy room, too?” said Harry desperately.

“Certainly not,” said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. “Professor Lockhart requested you particularly. Eight o’clock sharp, both of you.”

Harry and Ron slouched into the Great Hall in states of deepest gloom, Hermione behind them, wearing a *well-you-did-break-school-rules* sort of expression. Harry didn’t enjoy his shepherd’s pie as much as he’d thought. Both he and Ron felt they’d got the worse deal.

“Filch’ll have me there all night,” said Ron heavily. “No magic! There must be about a hundred cups in that room. I’m no good at Muggle cleaning.”

“I’d swap anytime,” said Harry hollowly. “I’ve had loads of practice with the Dursleys. Answering Lockhart’s fan mail . . . he’ll be a nightmare. . . .”

Saturday afternoon seemed to melt away, and in what seemed like no time, it was five minutes to eight, and Harry was dragging his feet along the second-floor corridor to Lockhart’s office. He gritted his teeth and knocked.

The door flew open at once. Lockhart beamed down at him.

“Ah, here’s the scalawag!” he said. “Come in, Harry, come in —”

Shining brightly on the walls by the light of many candles were countless framed photographs of Lockhart. He had even signed a few of them. Another large pile lay on his desk.

“You can address the envelopes!” Lockhart told Harry, as though this was a huge treat. “This first one’s to Gladys Gudgeon, bless her — huge fan of mine —”

The minutes snailed by. Harry let Lockhart’s voice wash over him, occasionally saying, “Mmm” and “Right” and “Yeah.” Now and then he caught a phrase like, “Fame’s a fickle friend, Harry,” or “Celebrity is as celebrity does, remember that.”

The candles burned lower and lower, making the light dance over the many moving faces of Lockhart watching him. Harry moved his aching hand over what felt like the thousandth envelope, writing out Veronica Smethley’s address. *It must be nearly time to leave*, Harry thought miserably, *please let it be nearly time*. . . .

And then he heard something — something quite apart from the spitting of the dying candles and Lockhart's prattle about his fans.

It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone marrow, a voice of breathtaking, ice-cold venom.

"Come . . . come to me. . . . Let me rip you. . . . Let me tear you. . . . Let me kill you. . . ."

Harry gave a huge jump and a large lilac blot appeared on Veronica Smethley's street.

"What?" he said loudly.

"I know!" said Lockhart. "Six solid months at the top of the best-seller list! Broke all records!"

"No," said Harry frantically. "That voice!"

"Sorry?" said Lockhart, looking puzzled. "What voice?"

"That — that voice that said — didn't you hear it?"

Lockhart was looking at Harry in high astonishment.

"What *are* you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you're getting a little drowsy? Great Scott — look at the time! We've been here nearly four hours! I'd never have believed it — the time's flown, hasn't it?"

Harry didn't answer. He was straining his ears to hear the voice again, but there was no sound now except for Lockhart telling him he mustn't expect a treat like this every time he got detention. Feeling dazed, Harry left.

It was so late that the Gryffindor common room was almost empty. Harry went straight up to the dormitory. Ron wasn't back yet. Harry pulled on his pajamas, got into bed, and waited. Half an hour later, Ron arrived, nursing his right arm and bringing a strong smell of polish into the darkened room.

“My muscles have all seized up,” he groaned, sinking on his bed. “Fourteen times he made me buff up that Quidditch Cup before he was satisfied. And then I had another slug attack all over a Special Award for Services to the School. Took ages to get the slime off. . . . How was it with Lockhart?”

Keeping his voice low so as not to wake Neville, Dean, and Seamus, Harry told Ron exactly what he had heard.

“And Lockhart said he couldn’t hear it?” said Ron. Harry could see him frowning in the moonlight. “D’you think he was lying? But I don’t get it — even someone invisible would’ve had to open the door.”

“I know,” said Harry, lying back in his four-poster and staring at the canopy above him. “I don’t get it either.”

Modderbloed en Murmurering

Die volgende paar dae koes Harry weg elke keer dat hy vir Gilderoy Lockhart in die gange sien. Dis heelwat moeiliker om vir Colin Creevey te vermy, want dis al of Colin Harry se klasrooster uit sy kop uit ken. Dit lyk of niks vir Colin lekkerder is as om ses, sewe keer elke dag te vra, "Hoe gaan dit, Harry?" net om Harry te hoor antwoord, "Goed dankie, Colin," maak nie saak hoe moedeloos Harry ook al mag klink as hy dit sê nie.

Hedwig is nog steeds kwaad vir Harry oor die rampspoedige rit in die vlieënde motor en Ron se towerstaf gee nog steeds probleme. Hy oortref homself een Vrydagoggend toe hy uit Ron se hand spring en die klein professor Flickerpitt tussen die oë tref, sodat 'n groot, groen, polsende pitsweer op die plek verskyn. Harry is regtig bly toe dit naweek is. Hy, Ron en Hermien wil daardie Saterdagoggend by Hagrid gaan kuier. Harry word egter vroeg die oggend wakker geskud deur Oliver Wood, die kaptein van Griffindor se Kwiddiekspan.

"Wat's anie gang?" vra Harry slaperig.

"Kwiddiekoefening," sê Wood. "Kom!"

Harry loer deur die venster. Daar hang 'n dun lagie mis oor die pienk en goue lug. Noudat hy helder wakker is, kan hy nie verstaan hoe hy deur die voëls se lawaai kon slaap nie.

"Oliver," kreun Harry, "dis nog skaars oggend."

"Presies," sê Wood. Hy is 'n lang, frisgeboude sesdejaar en op hierdie oomblik glinster sy oë fanaties. "Dis deel van ons nuwe oefenprogram. Komaan, vat jou besem, ons moet loop," sê hy hartlik. "Nie een van die ander spanne het al begin oefen nie, vanjaar gaan ons eerste wegspring . . ."

Harry klouter gaap-gaap en bewend uit die bed en soek sy Kwiddiekoefenklere.

"Mooi so," sê Wood. "Sien jou oor vyftien minute op die veld."

Toe hy sy skarlakenrooi kleed aanhet en sy mantel vir ekstra warmte oorgegooi het, skryf Harry vinnig 'n briefie vir Ron om te verduidelik waar hy is. Met sy Nimbus Tweeduisend oor sy skouer stap hy met die wenteltrap af na die geselskamer. Hy is net by die portretopening toe daar

'n geklater agter hom is en Colin Creevey met die trap af gehardloop kom met 'n kamera wat wild om sy nek swaai en iets wat hy in sy hand vas-klou.

“Ek het iemand jou naam op die trappe hoor sê, Harry! Kyk wat het ek! Ek het dit laat ontwikkel en ek moet dit vir jou wys –”

Ietwat verwilderd kyk Harry na die foto wat Colin onder sy neus rond-swaai.

'n Bewegende, swart-en-wit Lockhart rem en trek aan 'n arm wat Harry besef syne moet wees. Hy is bly om te sien dat sy fotobeeld hom terdeê teensit en weier om in die foto gesleep te word. Voor sy oë gee Lockhart moed op en sink hygend teen die wit rand van die foto neer.

“Sal jy dit teken?” vra Colin gretig.

“Nee,” sê Harry bot en kyk vinnig rond om seker te maak dat die ver-trek wel leeg is. “Jammer, Colin, ek's haastig – Kwiddiekoefening.”

Hy klouter deur die portretopening.

“O, lekker! Wag vir my! Ek het nog nooit 'n Kwiddiekwedstryd gesien nie!”

Colin skarrel deur die opening agter hom aan.

“Dis regtig baie vervelig,” sê Harry gou, maar Colin maak of hy nie hoor nie. Sy gesig blink van opgewondenheid.

“Jy is die jongste speler in 'n honderd jaar, of hoe, Harry? Jy is mos, Harry, jy is mos?” sê Colin terwyl hy langs hom draf. “Jy moet ontsettend goed wees. Ek het nog nooit gevlieg nie. Is dit maklik? Is dit jou eie besem? Is dit die beste wat daar is?”

Harry weet nie hoe om van hom ontslae te raak nie. Dis soos om 'n be-sonder praatsieke skaduwee te hê.

“Ek ken nie eintlik Kwiddiek nie,” sê Colin uitasem. “Is dit waar dat daar vier balle is? En dat twee van hulle rondvlieg en die mense van hul besems afstamp?”

“Ja,” sê Harry stug en probeer teen sy sin om die ingewikkelde Kwid-diekreëls te verduidelik. “Hulle is die Mokers. Elke span het twee Brekers wat kolwe het waarmee hulle die Mokers van hul spanlede af wegslaan. Fred en George Weasley is Griffindor se Brekers.”

“En wat doen die ander balle?” vra Colin en struikel oor 'n paar trap-pe, want hy staar met 'n wydooop mond na Harry.

“Wel, die Swelger – dis die groterige rooi bal – is die een waarmee doele aangeteken word. Daar is drie Jaers in elke span wat die Swelger vir mekaar gooi en probeer om dit deur die doelpale aan die ent van die veld te kry – dis drie lang pale met hoepels aan die punte.”

“– en die vierde bal –”

“– is die Goue Snip,” sê Harry, “en dis baie klein, baie vinnig en moei-lik om te vang. Dis wat die Soeker moet doen, want 'n Kwiddiekwedstryd hou nie op voor die Snip gevang is nie. Sodra 'n span se Soeker die Snip

gryvang het, verdien daardie span 'n honderd-en-vyftig punte.”

“En jy is Griffindor se Soeker, nè?” sê Colin vol bewondering.

“Ja,” sê Harry toe hulle uitstap by die kasteel en aanstryk oor die clounat gras. “Dan’s daar nog die Wagter ook. Hy pas die doelpale op. Dis al, regtig.”

Maar Colin hou aan om Harry uit te vra die hele ent pad oor die grasperk tot by die Kwiddiekveld waar Harry hom afskud toe hy na die kleedkamer gaan. Colin roep agterna in sy skril stemmetjie, “Ek gaan soek solank ’n goeie sitplek, Harry!” en laat vat na die pawiljoen.

Die res van die Griffindor-span is reeds in die kleedkamer. Wood is die enigste een wat heeltemal wakker lyk. Fred en George Weasley sit met pofferige oë en ongekamde hare langs die vierdejaar Alicia Spinnet, wat lyk of sy enige oomblik teen die muur agter haar gaan indommel. Haar mede-Jaers, Katie Bell en Angelina Johnson, sit gapend sy aan sy oorkant hulle.

“O, daar is jy, Harry, waar was jy?” vra Wood ergerlik. “Toe-toe, ek wil vinnig met julle praat voor ons veld toe gaan; ek het hierdie somer ’n nuwe oefenprogram uitgewerk wat ek dink ’n groot verskil gaan maak . . .”

Wood hou ’n groot diagram van ’n Kwiddiekveld omhoog waarop ’n klomp strepe, pyle en kruise in verskillende kleure ink geteken is. Hy haal sy towerstaf uit, tik die bord daarmee en die pyle begin soos ruspers oor die diagram wriemel. Toe Wood lostrek met ’n praatjie oor sy nuwe taktiek, knik Fred Weasley se kop op Alicia Spinnet se skouer en raak hy aan die snork.

Dit neem amper twintig minute om te verduidelik wat op die eerste bord aangaan, maar daaronder is nog ’n bord, en daaronder ’n derde. Harry gaan in ’n soort koma terwyl Wood se stem aan en aan in sy ore dreun.

“So,” sê Wood uiteindelik, sodat Harry wakker ruk uit ’n heerlike fantasie oor wat daar alles vir ontbyt by die kasteel gaan wees, “is dit duidelik? Enige vrae?”

“Ek het ’n vraag, Oliver,” sê George, wat net toe wakker skrik. “Hoe kom het jy nie dit alles gister gesê toe ons nog wakker was nie?”

Wood is omgekrap.

“Nou luister julle vir my,” sê hy en gluur hulle aan, “ons moes laas jaar die Kwiddiekbeker gewen het. Ons was verreweg die beste span. Maar ongelukkig, weens omstandighede buite my beheer . . .”

Harry skuifel skuldig rond op sy sitplek. Tydens die laaste wedstryd was hy bewusteloos in die siekeboeg, wat beteken het dat Griffindor een speler te min gehad het en hulle hul ergste nederlaag in driehonderd jaar gely het.

Dit neem ’n rukkie voor Wood weer beheer oor homself het. Die vorige nederlaag lê beslis nog swaar op sy gemoed.

"Dus gaan ons hierdie jaar harder oefen as ooit tevore . . . Goed, laat ons ons nuwe planne in die praktyk gaan toepas!" roep Wood uit, terwyl hy sy besem gryp en sy span na die veld lei. Gaap-gaap en met stywe bene strompel die spanlede agterna.

Hulle was so lank in die kleedkamer dat die son teen hierdie tyd al heeltemal op is, hoewel daar nog 'n effense mistigheid oor die gras in die stadion hang. Toe Harry op die veld stap, sien hy vir Ron en Hermien op die pawiljoen sit.

"Is julle nog nie klaar nie?" roep Ron ongelowig uit.

"Het nog nie eens begin nie," sê Harry en kyk begerig na die roosterbrood en marmelade wat Ron en Hermien van die Groot Saal af gebring het. "Wood het vir ons nuwe bewegings geleer."

Hy klim op sy besem, skop weg teen die grond en seil die lug in. Die koel oggendluggie speel oor sy gesig en laat hom baie meer op en wakker voel as Wood se ellelange praatjie. Dis heerlik om terug te wees op die Kwid-diekveld. Hy vlieg reg om die stadion en jaag resies met Fred en George.

"Wat is daardie snaakse klikgeluid?" roep Fred uit toe hulle om 'n hoek vlieg.

Harry loer na die pawiljoen. Colin sit op een van die hoogste sitplekke, sy kamera gelig en hy neem foto na foto, sodat die klikgeluide op vreemde wyse deur die verlate stadion weerklink.

"Kyk hiernatoe, Harry! Hiernatoe!" skreeu hy skril.

"Wie's dit?" vra Fred.

"Weet nie," jok Harry en gee vet om so ver moontlik van Colin af te kom.

"Wat's aan die gang?" sê Wood fronsend terwyl hy nader vlieg. "Waarom neem daardie eerstejaar foto's? Ek hou net niks daarvan nie. Hy kan 'n Slibberin-spioen wees wat probeer uitvind wat ons oefenprogram behels."

"Hy's in Griffindor," sê Harry vinnig.

"Die Slibberins het nie 'n spioen nodig nie, Oliver," sê George.

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra Wood knorrig.

"Want hulle is hier," sê George en wys met sy hand.

'n Klompie mense in groen mantels kom, besem in die hand, aangestap oor die veld.

"Dit kan nie waar wees nie," sis Wood verontwaardig. "Ek het die veld vir vandag bespreek! Ek sal uitvind wat hier aan die gang is."

Wood laat vat grond toe. In sy woede land hy harder as wat hy beplan het, sodat hy steier-steier afklim. Harry, Fred en George kom agterna.

"Flint!" brul Wood vir die Slibberin-kaptein. "Dit is ons oefentyd! Ons het spesiaal vroeg opgestaan! Julle kan maar teruggaan!"

Marcus Flint is selfs groter as Wood. Daar is 'n uitdrukking van trolagtige geslepenheid op sy gesig toe hy antwoord, "Genoeg plek vir ons almal, Wood."

Nou kom Angelina, Alicia en Katie ook nader. Daar is geen meisies in die Slibberin-span nie – hulle staan skouer aan skouer en grynslag, terwyl hulle na die Griffindors gluur.

“Maar ek het die veld bespreek!” sê Wood en spoeg amper van woede. “Ek het dit bespreek!”

“Aha,” sê Flint, “maar ek het ’n spesiaal ondertekende briefie van professor Snerp.

“Ek, professor S. Snerp, gee die Slibberin-span hiermee toestemming om vandag op die Kwiddiekveld te oefen aangesien hulle hul nuwe Soeker moet oplei.”

“Julle het ’n nuwe Soeker?” sê Wood wie se aandag vir ’n oomblik afgetrek is. “Waar?”

Van agter die ses groot figure voor hulle verskyn ’n sewende, kleiner seun met ’n breë glimlag op sy skerp, bleek gesig. Dit is Draco Malfoy.

“Is jy nie Lucius Malfoy se seun nie?” vra Fred terwyl hy vol minagting na Malfoy kyk.

“Noudat jy van Draco se pa praat,” sê Flint, terwyl die hele Slibberin-span nog breër glimlag. “Kom ek wys julle watter besondere geskenk hy aan die Slibberin-span gegee het.”

Al sewe spanlede wys hul besems. Sewe blink gepoleerde, splinter-nuwe stele en sewe stelle fyn goue letters wat die woorde Nimbus Tweeduisend-en-een uitspel, glim in die vroeë oggendson, reg onder die Griffindors se neuse.

“Die heel jongste model. Het net laas maand uitgekome,” sê Flint ongeërg en raps ’n krieseltjie stof van sy besem af. “Is glo aansienlik vin-niger as die ou Tweeduisend-reeks. En daardie ou Wegvee Vywe,” en hy glimlag onaangenaam vir Fred en George wat elk ’n Wegvee Vyf vashou, “wel, ons vee hulle skoon van die veld af.”

Vir ’n oomblik is die lede van die Griffindor-span heeltemal sprake-loos. Malfoy grynslag so breed dat sy koue oë net twee skrefies is.

“O, kyk,” sê Flint. “’n Inval op die veld . . .”

Ron en Hermien kom aangestap om te hoor wat aangaan.

“Wat maak julle?” vra Ron vir Harry. “Hoekom speel julle nie? En wat maak hy hier?”

Hy kyk na Malfoy en merk vir die eerste keer sy Slibberin-Kwiddieklere.

“Ek is Slibberin se nuwe Soeker, Weasley,” sê Malfoy trots. “Hulle is almal jaloers op die nuwe besems wat my pa vir ons span gekoop het.”

Ron gaap die sewe uitsoekbesems voor hom oopmond aan.

“Mooi, nè?” sê Malfoy gladweg. “Dalk kan die Griffindor-span ’n bietjie goud insamel en ook nuwe besems gaan koop. Julle kan daardie Wegvee Vywe opveil, daar sal seker iewers ’n museum wees wat die goed wil koop.”

Die Slibberin-span skree van die lag.

“Ten minste het niemand in die Griffindor-span hul plekke *gekoop* nie,” sê Hermien kwaai. “*Hulle* het suiwer op talent ingekom.”

Die selfvoldane uitdrukking op Malfoy se gesig weifel.

“Niemand het gevra wat jy dink nie, jou vieslike klein Modderbloed,” spoeg hy.

Harry weet oombliklik dat Malfoy iets vreesliks gesê het, want ’n onmiddellike herrie volg op sy woorde. Flint moet voor Malfoy induik om te keer dat Fred en George op hom spring, Alicia skree, “*Hoe durf jy!*” en Ron steek sy hand in sy kleed, pluk sy towerstaf uit en gil, “Hiervoor sal jy betaal, Malfoy!” terwyl hy dit onderdeur Flint se arm op Malfoy se gesig rig.

’n Harde klapgeluid weergalm deur die stadion en ’n straal groen lig skiet uit die verkeerde punt van Ron se towerstaf, tref hom in die maag en laat hom hard op sy sitvlak oor die gras trek.

“Ron! Ron! Is jy oukei?” kryns Hermien.

Ron maak sy mond oop om te praat, maar geen woorde kom uit nie. Pleks daarvan breek hy ’n allemintige wind en ’n paar slakke glip oor sy onderlip en val in sy skoot.

Die Slibberin-span is boeglam gelag. Flint is dubbeld gevou. Hy hang aan sy besem om regop te bly. Malfoy staan hande-viervoet en slaan die grond met sy vuiste. Die Griffindors maak ’n kring om Ron wat nog steeds groot, blink, doplose slakke opbring. Dit lyk of niemand kans sien om aan hom te raak nie.

“Ons beter hom by Hagrid kry, dis die naaste,” sê Harry vir Hermien, wat dapper knik voor die tweestuks vir Ron aan sy arms ophys.

“Wat het gebeur, Harry? Wat het gebeur? Is hy siek? Jy kan hom gesond maak, jy kan, nè?” Colin kom aangehardloop en dans om hulle terwyl hulle van die veld af stap. Ron se maag trek weer saam en nog slakke glip oor sy ken.

“Oeee,” sê Colin, gefassineer, en lig sy kamera. “Kan julle hom stil hou, Harry?”

“Maak dat jy wegkom, Colin!” sê Harry vererg. Hy en Hermien ondersteun vir Ron die hele ent pad uit die stadion en oor die terrein na die kant van die woud.

“Amper daar, Ron,” sê Hermien toe hulle die boswagter se hut sien. “Nog net ’n paar minute dan’s alles reg . . . amper daar . . .”

Hulle is sowat ses meter van Hagrid se hut af toe die voordeur skielik oopgaan, maar dis nie Hagrid wat uitkom nie. Dis Gilderoy Lockhart in ’n lilapers kleed.

“Gou, hier,” sis Harry dringend en sleep vir Ron agter die naaste bos in. Hermien gaan agterna, hoewel ietwat onwillig.

“Dis baie eenvoudig as ’n mens weet wat jy doen!” sê Lockhart in ’n harde stem vir Hagrid. “Jy weet waar om my in die hande kry as jy hulp

nodig het! Ek sal vir jou 'n eksemplaar van my boek gee – ek is regtig verbaas dat jy nie reeds een het nie. Ek teken net vanaand een en stuur dit vir jou. Wel, tot siens!” Hy stap aan in die rigting van die kasteel.

Harry wag tot Lockhart buite sig is, toe sleep hy vir Ron uit die bos en tot voor Hagrid se deur. Hulle klop hard en dringend.

Hagrid lyk baie iesegrimmig toe hy oopmaak, maar sy gesig helder op toe hy sien wie dit is.

“Het gewonder wanneer julle gaan kom kuier – kom in, kom in – dag dis dalk weer professor Lockhart.”

Harry en Hermien help Ron oor die drumpel tot in die eenvertrekhuut, wat 'n enorme bed in die een hoek het en 'n vrolike, knetterende vuur in die ander. Hagrid lyk nie besonder begaan oor Ron se slakprobleem nie. Harry verduidelik gou wat gebeur het, terwyl hy vir Ron in 'n stoel help.

“Eerder buitentoe as binnetoe,” sê Hagrid vrolik en plak 'n groot koperkom voor Ron neer. “Kry hulle uit, Ron.”

“Ek dink nie 'n mens kan eintlik iets anders doen as wag tot dit ophou nie,” sê Hermien angstig, terwyl sy kyk hoe Ron oor die skottel buig. “Dis op sy beste 'n moeilike vloek om te hanteer, maar met 'n stukkende towerstaf . . .”

Hagrid is besig om tee te maak. Sy beerhond, Tande, sit en kwyl oor Harry.

“Wat wou Lockhart hê, Hagrid?” vra Harry terwyl hy Tande se ore krap.

“Probeer my raad gee oor hoe om watergeeste uit 'n put te kry,” grom Hagrid, terwyl hy 'n halfgeplukte hoenderhaan van sy geskropte tafel af stoot en die teepot neersit. “Asof ek nie weet nie. Dan gaan hy ook aan en aan oor die een of ander Doodsbode wat hy glo in die ban gedoen het. As daar een woord van waar is, eet ek hierdie ketel op.”

Dis baie ongewoon vir Hagrid om een van Hogwarts se onderwysers te kritiseer en Harry kyk verbaas na hom. Hermien sê egter, in 'n stemmetjie wat baie hoër as gewoonlik is, “Ek dink jy's nou bietjie onregverdig. Dis tog duidelik dat professor Dompeldorius gedink het dat hy die beste man vir die werk is –”

“Die enigste man vir die werk,” sê Hagrid en hou 'n bord vol tuisgemaakte tameletjie voor hulle, terwyl Ron slymerig in die kom hoes. “En ek bedoel, die enigste een. Dit raak al moeiliker om iemand te kry om Donker Kunste te gee. Mense wil dit net nie meer doen nie. Hulle dink daar's 'n vloek op. Almal hou net 'n rukkies. Maar sê eers vir my,” Hagrid beduie met sy kop na Ron, “op wie wou hy nou eintlik 'n vloek sit?”

“Malfoy het Hermien name genoem. Dit moet baie erg wees, want almal het mal geraak.”

“Dit was erg,” sê Ron hees. Hy verskyn bo die tafel. Hy lyk bleek en sweterig. “Malfoy het gesê sy's 'n Modderbloed, Hagrid –”

Ron duik weg net toe 'n spul vars slakke hul verskyning maak. Hagrid lyk briesend kwaad.

“Hy het nie!” grom hy vir Hermien.

“Hy het,” sê sy. “Maar ek weet nie wat dit beteken nie. Ek het natuurlik dadelik besef dat dit ongeskik is, maar . . .”

“Dis net mooi die onbeskofste ding waaraan hy kon dink,” hyg Ron, terwyl hy weer regop sukkel. “Modderbloed is 'n vieslike naam vir iemand wat Moggelouers het – jy weet, gewone ouers. Daar is party towenaars – soos Malfoy se familie – wat dink hulle is beter as enigiemand anders omdat hulle bloed kastig suiwer is.” Hy breek 'n klein windjie en 'n enkele slak val in sy uitgestrekte hand. Hy gooi dit in die skottel en toe gaan hy voort. “Ek bedoel, ons ander weet dit maak geen verskil nie. Vat vir Neville Loggerenberg – sy bloedlyn is suiwer, maar hy weet skaars watter kant van sy heksekete bo is.”

“En niemand het nog 'n towerspreuk uitgedink wat onse Hermien nie kan doen nie,” sê Hagrid trots, sodat Hermien bloedrooi bloos.

“Dis 'n vieslike ding om iemand te noem,” sê Ron en vee sy sweterige voorkop met 'n bewende hand af. “Vuil bloed, sien. Gewone bloed. Dis malligheid. Deesdae is die meeste towenaars in elk geval halfbloed. Ons sou lankal uitgesterf het as ons nie met Moggels getrou het nie.”

Hy braak weer en duik weg.

“Wel, ek neem jou nie kwalik dat jy 'n vloek op hom probeer sit het nie, Ron,” sê Hagrid bo die geluid van slakke wat in die kom val. “Maar dis dalk 'n goeie ding dat jou toorstaf nie gewerk het nie. Ek wed ou Lucius Malfoy sou skool toe gekom en 'n bohaai opgeskop het as jy 'n vloek op sy seun gesit het. Ten minste's jy nie in die moeilikheid nie.”

Harry wil nog sê daar kan nie juis erger moeilikheid kan wees as slakke wat by jou mond uitborrel nie, maar hy kan nie; Hagrid se tuisgemaakte tamentele het sy kake aanmekaar vasgesement.

“Harry,” sê Hagrid onverwags, asof hy skielik aan iets gedink het, “ek't 'n appeltjie met jou te skil. Hoor jy deel getekende foto's uit. Hoekom kry ek nie een nie?”

Harry dwing sy kake woedend van mekaar af.

“Ek deel nie getekende foto's uit nie,” sê hy ergerlik. “As Lockhart nog steeds daarvoor staan en –”

Dan sien hy dat Hagrid lag.

“Net 'n ou grappie,” sê hy en slaan Harry so hartlik op die rug dat sy gesig die tafelblad tref. “Het geweet jy't nie regtig nie. Het vir Lockhart gesê jy hoef nie. Jy's beroemder as hy sonder dat jy eens probeer.”

“Wed hy't nie daarvan gehou nie,” sê Harry, terwyl hy orent kom en sy ken vryf.

“Dink nie hy het nie,” sê Hagrid met vonkelende oë. “Toe ek vir hom sê ek't nog nooit een van sy boeke gelees nie, het hy besluit om te loop.

tameletjie, Ron?" voeg hy by toe Ron weer 'n slag sy kop lig.

"Nee dankie," sê Ron floutjies. "Sal liewer nie 'n kans waag nie."

"Kom kyk wat het ek hier agter aan die groei," sê Hagrid toe Harry en Hermien klaar is met hul tee.

In die klein lappie groente net agter Hagrid se hut staan 'n dosyn van die grootste pampoene wat Harry nog gesien het. Elkeen is omtrent so groot soos 'n rots.

"Lyk goed, nè?" sê Hagrid tevrede. "Vir Allerheiligeaand . . . behoort dan groot genoeg te wees."

"Wat gee jy vir hulle?" vra Harry.

Hagrid loer oor sy skouer om seker te maak dat hulle alleen is.

"Wel, ek het – ag, jy weet – hulle so 'n bietjie gehelp."

Harry het Hagrid se geblomde pienk sambreel teen die agterste muur van die hut sien staan. Harry het rede om te vermoed dat hierdie sambreel meer as 'n blote sambreel is; om die waarheid te sê, hy het 'n sterk spesmaas dat Hagrid se ou skooltowerstaf binne-in weggesteek is. Hagrid mag nie toor nie. In sy derde jaar is hy uit Hogwarts geskors, maar Harry weet nie hoekom nie – as iemand daarvan praat, maak Hagrid hard keel skoon en word hy verskriklik doof tot hulle die onderwerp verander.

"'n Opswelpaljas, nè?" sê Hermien, iewers tussen lag en afkeer. "Ek moet sê, dis 'n deeglike stukkie werk."

"Dis wat jou klein sussie ook gesê het," sê Hagrid en knik na Ron. "Het haar gister raakgeloop." Hagrid loer skuinsweg na Harry en sy baard bewe. "Sy't gesê sy kyk net so 'n bietjie rond, maar ek dink sy't gehoop sy loop in iemand anders vas hier by my huis." Hy knipoog vir Harry. "As jy my vra, sal sy nie nee dankie sê vir 'n getekende –"

"Ag, hou jou snater," sê Harry. Ron snork van die lag en sprei 'n spul slakke oor die grond.

"Kyk wat jy doen!" brul Hagrid en sleep vir Ron van sy kosbare pampoene af weg. Dit is amper etenstyd en siende dat Harry die hele oggend net een stukkie tameletjie gehad het, is hy gretig om terug skool toe te gaan vir ete. Hulle groet vir Hagrid en stap kasteel toe. Ron hik elke nou en dan, maar bring darem net twee baie klein slakkies op.

Hulle is skaars in die koel ingangsportaal of 'n stem klink op. "So, daar is julle, Potter, Weasley." Professor McGonagall kom aangestap en sy lyk streng. "Julle sal vanaand jul detensie doen."

"Wat moet ons doen, professor?" sê Ron en sluk 'n ontydige wind se nuagtig terug.

"Jy sal die silwer in die trofeekamer blink vryf saam met mnr. Argus Fillis," sê professor McGonagall. "En geen towerkunsies nie, Weasley – spierkrag."

Ron sluk. Al die studente haat die opsigter, Argus Fillis.

“En jy, Potter, sal professor Lockhart help om sy bewonderaarspos te beantwoord,” sê professor McGonagall.

“O, nee – kan ek nie liewer ook in die trofeekamer gaan werk nie?” sê Harry wanhopig.

“Beslis nie,” sê professor McGonagall en lig haar wenkbroue. “Professor Lockhart het spesifiek vir jou gevra. Vanaand om agtuur op die kop, albei van julle.”

Diep terneergedruk slof Harry en Ron na die Groot Saal, met Hermien agter hulle aan. Daar is ’n uitdrukking van *julle-wil-mos-die-skoolreëls-oortree* op haar gesig. Harry geniet sy herderspastei glad nie so baie soos andersins nie. Sowel hy as Ron voel behoorlik te na gekom.

“Fillis sal my die hele nag daar hou,” sê Ron swaarmoedig. “Geen toorkrag nie! Daar moet ’n honderd bekere in daardie kamer wees. Ek is nie goed met Moggelwerk nie.”

“Ek sal enige tyd ruil,” sê Harry in ’n hol stem. “Ek het tonne oefening gehad by die Dursleys. Maar Lockhart se bewonderaarspos . . . dit gaan ’n nagmerrie wees . . .”

Saterdagmiddag smelt weg en te gou is dit vyf minute voor agt. Harry stap met lood in sy voete in die gang af na Lockhart se kantoor. Hy kners op sy tande en klop.

Die deur vlieg dadelik oop. Lockhart kyk stralend na hom.

“A, hier’s die klein ondeug!” sê hy. “Kom in, Harry, kom in.”

Teen die mure, verlig deur talle kerse, hang eindelose foto’s van Lockhart. Hy het tot ’n paar van hulle onderteken. Op sy lessenaar lê nog ’n groot stapel.

“Jy kan die koeverte adresseer!” sê Lockhart vir Harry asof dit ’n groot voorreg is. “Die eerste een gaan aan Gladys Gudgeon, so dierbaar – een van my groot bewonderaars.”

Die minute sleep soos slakke verby. Harry laat Lockhart se stem oor hom spoel en sê net nou en dan “Mmm” en “Goed” en “Ja”. Af en toe vang hy ’n frase soos, “Roem is ’n wispelturige vriend, Harry,” of “Beroemdheid is wat die beroemde doen, onthou dit.”

Die kerse brand laer en laer en laat die lig dans oor die hordes bewegende fotobeelde van Lockhart wat hom dophou. Harry beweeg sy hand pynlik oor na wat soos die duisendste koevert voel terwyl hy Veronica Smethley se adres neerskryf. Dit moet amper tyd wees om te loop, dink hy, asseblief, laat dit amper tyd wees om . . .

Toe hoor hy dit – iets heeltemal anders as die gespetter van kerse wat uitbrand en Lockhart se ewige geklets oor sy bewonderaars.

Dis ’n stem, ’n stem wat hom tot in sy murg laat koud word, ’n ysige stem vol asembenewende gif .

“Kom . . . kom na my . . . dat ek jou kan verskeur . . . verslind . . . vermoor . . .”

Harry wip van die skrik en maak 'n groot pers klad bo-oor Veronica Smethly se adres.

“Wat?” sê hy hard.

“Ek weet!” sê Lockhart. “Ses volle maande heel boaan die blitsverkooperslys! Alle rekords oortref!”

“Nee!” sê Harry. “Daardie stem!”

“Ekskuus?” Lockhart lyk verbaas. “Watter stem?”

“Daardie – daardie stem wat gesê het – het u nie gehoor nie?”

Met openlike verbasing kyk Lockhart na Harry.

“Waarvan praat jy, Harry? Of is jy besig om vaak te word? Grote genade, kyk hoe laat is dit! Ons is al amper vier uur lank besig! Ek kan dit skaars glo – die tyd het gevlieg, nè?”

Harry antwoord nie. Hy spits sy ore in 'n poging om die stem weer te hoor, maar daar is nie 'n geluid nie, behalwe Lockhart wat hom maan dat hy nie moet dink dat elke detensie soveel pret gaan wees nie. So ietwat deur die wind stap Harry uit.

Dis so laat dat die Griffindor-geselskamer amper leeg is. Harry gaan reguit na hul slaapsaal. Ron is nog nie terug nie. Harry trek sy pajamas aan, klim in die bed en wag. 'n Halfuur later kom Ron in. Hy vryf sy regterarm en ruik sterk na politoer.

“My spiere het heel in 'n spasma gegaan,” kreun hy en val op sy bed. “Hy't my daardie Kwiddiekbeker veertien keer laat blink vryf voor hy tevrede was. En toe kry ek 'n slakaanval oor 'n Spesiale Toekenning vir Dienste gelewer aan die Skool. Het ure gevat om die slym af te kry . . . Hoe was Lockhart?”

Harry praat so sag moontlik om nie vir Neville, Dean en Septimus wakker te maak nie en vertel vir Ron presies wat hy gehoor het.

“En Lockhart sê hy't niks gehoor nie?” sê Ron. Harry sien hoe hy in die maanlig frons. “Dink jy hy't gelieg? Ek verstaan dit nie – selfs as iemand onsigbaar is, moet hy die deur nog steeds oopmaak.”

“Ek weet,” sê Harry en lê terug op sy hemelbed en staar na die baldakyn bo hom. “Ek verstaan dit ook nie.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE DEATHDAY PARTY

October arrived, spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle. Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was kept busy by a sudden spate of colds among the staff and students. Her Pepperup Potion worked instantly, though it left the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours afterward. Ginny Weasley, who had been looking

pale, was bullied into taking some by Percy. The steam pouring from under her vivid hair gave the impression that her whole head was on fire.

Raindrops the size of bullets thundered on the castle windows for days on end; the lake rose, the flower beds turned into muddy streams, and Hagrid's pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Oliver Wood's enthusiasm for regular training sessions, however, was not dampened, which was why Harry was to be found, late one stormy Saturday afternoon a few days before Halloween, returning to Gryffindor Tower, drenched to the skin and splattered with mud.

Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn't been a happy practice session. Fred and George, who had been spying on the Slytherin team, had seen for themselves the speed of those new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. They reported that the Slytherin team was no more than seven greenish blurs, shooting through the air like missiles.

As Harry squelched along the deserted corridor he came across somebody who looked just as preoccupied as he was. Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost of Gryffindor Tower, was staring morosely out of a window, muttering under his breath, "... don't fulfill their requirements ... half an inch, if that ..."

"Hello, Nick," said Harry.

"Hello, hello," said Nearly Headless Nick, starting and looking round. He wore a dashing, plumed hat on his long curly hair, and a tunic with a ruff, which concealed the fact that his neck was almost completely severed. He was pale as smoke, and Harry could see right through him to the dark sky and torrential rain outside.

"You look troubled, young Potter," said Nick, folding a transparent

letter as he spoke and tucking it inside his doublet.

“So do you,” said Harry.

“Ah,” Nearly Headless Nick waved an elegant hand, “a matter of no importance. . . . It’s not as though I really wanted to join. . . . Thought I’d apply, but apparently I ‘don’t fulfill requirements’ —”

In spite of his airy tone, there was a look of great bitterness on his face.

“But you would think, wouldn’t you,” he erupted suddenly, pulling the letter back out of his pocket, “that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless Hunt?”

“Oh — yes,” said Harry, who was obviously supposed to agree.

“I mean, nobody wishes more than I do that it had all been quick and clean, and my head had come off properly, I mean, it would have saved me a great deal of pain and ridicule. However —” Nearly Headless Nick shook his letter open and read furiously:

“We can only accept huntsmen whose heads have parted company with their bodies. You will appreciate that it would be impossible otherwise for members to participate in hunt activities such as Horseback Head-Juggling and Head Polo. It is with the greatest regret, therefore, that I must inform you that you do not fulfill our requirements. With very best wishes, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore.”

Fuming, Nearly Headless Nick stuffed the letter away.

“Half an inch of skin and sinew holding my neck on, Harry! Most

people would think that's good and beheaded, but oh, no, it's not enough for Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore."

Nearly Headless Nick took several deep breaths and then said, in a far calmer tone, "So — what's bothering you? Anything I can do?"

"No," said Harry. "Not unless you know where we can get seven free Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones for our match against Sly —"

The rest of Harry's sentence was drowned out by a high-pitched mewling from somewhere near his ankles. He looked down and found himself gazing into a pair of lamp-like yellow eyes. It was Mrs. Norris, the skeletal gray cat who was used by the caretaker, Argus Filch, as a sort of deputy in his endless battle against students.

"You'd better get out of here, Harry," said Nick quickly. "Filch isn't in a good mood — he's got the flu and some third years accidentally plastered frog brains all over the ceiling in dungeon five. He's been cleaning all morning, and if he sees you dripping mud all over the place —"

"Right," said Harry, backing away from the accusing stare of Mrs. Norris, but not quickly enough. Drawn to the spot by the mysterious power that seemed to connect him with his foul cat, Argus Filch burst suddenly through a tapestry to Harry's right, wheezing and looking wildly about for the rule-breaker. There was a thick tartan scarf bound around his head, and his nose was unusually purple.

"Filth!" he shouted, his jowls aquiver, his eyes popping alarmingly as he pointed at the muddy puddle that had dripped from Harry's Quidditch robes. "Mess and muck everywhere! I've had enough of it, I tell you! Follow me, Potter!"

So Harry waved a gloomy good-bye to Nearly Headless Nick and

followed Filch back downstairs, doubling the number of muddy footprints on the floor.

Harry had never been inside Filch's office before; it was a place most students avoided. The room was dingy and windowless, lit by a single oil lamp dangling from the low ceiling. A faint smell of fried fish lingered about the place. Wooden filing cabinets stood around the walls; from their labels, Harry could see that they contained details of every pupil Filch had ever punished. Fred and George Weasley had an entire drawer to themselves. A highly polished collection of chains and manacles hung on the wall behind Filch's desk. It was common knowledge that he was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend students by their ankles from the ceiling.

Filch grabbed a quill from a pot on his desk and began shuffling around looking for parchment.

"Dung," he muttered furiously, "great sizzling dragon bogies . . . frog brains . . . rat intestines . . . I've had enough of it . . . make an *example* . . . where's the form . . . yes . . ."

He retrieved a large roll of parchment from his desk drawer and stretched it out in front of him, dipping his long black quill into the ink pot.

"*Name* . . . Harry Potter. *Crime* . . ."

"It was only a bit of mud!" said Harry.

"It's only a bit of mud to you, boy, but to me it's an extra hour scrubbing!" shouted Filch, a drip shivering unpleasantly at the end of his bulbous nose. "*Crime* . . . befouling the castle . . . *suggested sentence* . . ."

Dabbing at his streaming nose, Filch squinted unpleasantly at Harry, who waited with bated breath for his sentence to fall.

But as Filch lowered his quill, there was a great BANG! on the ceiling of the office, which made the oil lamp rattle.

“PEEVES!” Filch roared, flinging down his quill in a transport of rage. “I’ll have you this time, I’ll have you!”

And without a backward glance at Harry, Filch ran flat-footed from the office, Mrs. Norris streaking alongside him.

Peeves was the school poltergeist, a grinning, airborne menace who lived to cause havoc and distress. Harry didn’t much like Peeves, but couldn’t help feeling grateful for his timing. Hopefully, whatever Peeves had done (and it sounded as though he’d wrecked something very big this time) would distract Filch from Harry.

Thinking that he should probably wait for Filch to come back, Harry sank into a moth-eaten chair next to the desk. There was only one thing on it apart from his half-completed form: a large, glossy, purple envelope with silver lettering on the front. With a quick glance at the door to check that Filch wasn’t on his way back, Harry picked up the envelope and read:

KWIKSPELL

A Correspondence Course in Beginners’ Magic

Intrigued, Harry flicked the envelope open and pulled out the sheaf of parchment inside. More curly silver writing on the front page said:

Feel out of step in the world of modern magic? Find yourself

making excuses not to perform simple spells? Ever been taunted for your woeful wandwork?

There is an answer!

Kwikspell is an all-new, fail-safe, quick-result, easy-learn course. Hundreds of witches and wizards have benefited from the Kwikspell method!

Madam Z. Nettles of Topsham writes:

“I had no memory for incantations and my potions were a family joke! Now, after a Kwikspell course, I am the center of attention at parties and friends beg for the recipe of my Scintillation Solution!”

Warlock D. J. Prod of Didsbury says:

“My wife used to sneer at my feeble charms, but one month into your fabulous Kwikspell course and I succeeded in turning her into a yak! Thank you, Kwikspell!”

Fascinated, Harry thumbed through the rest of the envelope's contents. Why on earth did Filch want a Kwikspell course? Did this mean he wasn't a proper wizard? Harry was just reading "Lesson One: Holding Your Wand (Some Useful Tips)" when shuffling footsteps outside told him Filch was coming back. Stuffing the parchment back into the envelope, Harry threw it back onto the desk just as the door opened.

Filch was looking triumphant.

"That Vanishing Cabinet was extremely valuable!" he was saying gleefully to Mrs. Norris. "We'll have Peeves out this time, my sweet
—"

His eyes fell on Harry and then darted to the Kwikspell envelope, which, Harry realized too late, was lying two feet away from where it had started.

Filch's pasty face went brick red. Harry braced himself for a tidal wave of fury. Filch hobbled across to his desk, snatched up the envelope, and threw it into a drawer.

"Have you — did you read — ?" he sputtered.

"No," Harry lied quickly.

Filch's knobbly hands were twisting together.

"If I thought you'd read my private — not that it's mine — for a friend — be that as it may — however —"

Harry was staring at him, alarmed; Filch had never looked madder. His eyes were popping, a tic was going in one of his pouchy cheeks, and the tartan scarf didn't help.

"Very well — go — and don't breathe a word — not that — however, if you didn't read — go now, I have to write up Peeves' report — go —"

Amazed at his luck, Harry sped out of the office, up the corridor, and back upstairs. To escape from Filch's office without punishment was probably some kind of school record.

"Harry! Harry! Did it work?"

Nearly Headless Nick came gliding out of a classroom. Behind him, Harry could see the wreckage of a large black-and-gold cabinet that appeared to have been dropped from a great height.

"I persuaded Peeves to crash it right over Filch's office," said Nick eagerly. "Thought it might distract him —"

"Was that you?" said Harry gratefully. "Yeah, it worked, I didn't

even get detention. Thanks, Nick!”

They set off up the corridor together. Nearly Headless Nick, Harry noticed, was still holding Sir Patrick’s rejection letter.

“I wish there was something I could do for you about the Headless Hunt,” Harry said.

Nearly Headless Nick stopped in his tracks and Harry walked right through him. He wished he hadn’t; it was like stepping through an icy shower.

“But there *is* something you could do for me,” said Nick excitedly. “Harry — would I be asking too much — but no, you wouldn’t want —”

“What is it?” said Harry.

“Well, this Halloween will be my five hundredth deathday,” said Nearly Headless Nick, drawing himself up and looking dignified.

“Oh,” said Harry, not sure whether he should look sorry or happy about this. “Right.”

“I’m holding a party down in one of the roomier dungeons. Friends will be coming from all over the country. It would be such an *honor* if you would attend. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger would be most welcome, too, of course — but I daresay you’d rather go to the school feast?” He watched Harry on tenterhooks.

“No,” said Harry quickly, “I’ll come —”

“My dear boy! Harry Potter, at my deathday party! And” — he hesitated, looking excited — “do you think you could *possibly* mention to Sir Patrick how *very* frightening and impressive you find me?”

“Of — of course,” said Harry.

Nearly Headless Nick beamed at him.

“A deathday party?” said Hermione keenly when Harry had changed at last and joined her and Ron in the common room. “I bet there aren’t many living people who can say they’ve been to one of those — it’ll be fascinating!”

“Why would anyone want to celebrate the day they died?” said Ron, who was halfway through his Potions homework and grumpy. “Sounds dead depressing to me. . . .”

Rain was still lashing the windows, which were now inky black, but inside all looked bright and cheerful. The firelight glowed over the countless squashy armchairs where people sat reading, talking, doing homework or, in the case of Fred and George Weasley, trying to find out what would happen if you fed a Filibuster firework to a salamander. Fred had “rescued” the brilliant orange, fire-dwelling lizard from a Care of Magical Creatures class and it was now smoldering gently on a table surrounded by a knot of curious people.

Harry was at the point of telling Ron and Hermione about Filch and the Kwikspell course when the salamander suddenly whizzed into the air, emitting loud sparks and bangs as it whirled wildly round the room. The sight of Percy bellowing himself hoarse at Fred and George, the spectacular display of tangerine stars showering from the salamander’s mouth, and its escape into the fire, with accompanying explosions, drove both Filch and the Kwikspell envelope from Harry’s mind.

By the time Halloween arrived, Harry was regretting his rash promise to go to the deathday party. The rest of the school was

happily anticipating their Halloween feast; the Great Hall had been decorated with the usual live bats, Hagrid's vast pumpkins had been carved into lanterns large enough for three men to sit in, and there were rumors that Dumbledore had booked a troupe of dancing skeletons for the entertainment.

"A promise is a promise," Hermione reminded Harry bossily. "You *said* you'd go to the deathday party."

So at seven o'clock, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked straight past the doorway to the packed Great Hall, which was glittering invitingly with gold plates and candles, and directed their steps instead toward the dungeons.

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles, too, though the effect was far from cheerful: These were long, thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, casting a dim, ghostly light even over their own living faces. The temperature dropped with every step they took. As Harry shivered and drew his robes tightly around him, he heard what sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping an enormous blackboard.

"Is that supposed to be *music*?" Ron whispered. They turned a corner and saw Nearly Headless Nick standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes.

"My dear friends," he said mournfully. "Welcome, welcome . . . so pleased you could come. . . ."

He swept off his plumed hat and bowed them inside.

It was an incredible sight. The dungeon was full of hundreds of pearly-white, translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty

musical saws, played by an orchestra on a raised, black-draped platform. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thousand more black candles. Their breath rose in a mist before them; it was like stepping into a freezer.

“Shall we have a look around?” Harry suggested, wanting to warm up his feet.

“Careful not to walk through anyone,” said Ron nervously, and they set off around the edge of the dance floor. They passed a group of gloomy nuns, a ragged man wearing chains, and the Fat Friar, a cheerful Hufflepuff ghost, who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead. Harry wasn’t surprised to see that the Bloody Baron, a gaunt, staring Slytherin ghost covered in silver bloodstains, was being given a wide berth by the other ghosts.

“Oh, no,” said Hermione, stopping abruptly. “Turn back, turn back, I don’t want to talk to Moaning Myrtle —”

“Who?” said Harry as they backtracked quickly.

“She haunts one of the toilets in the girls’ bathroom on the first floor,” said Hermione.

“She haunts a *toilet*?”

“Yes. It’s been out of order all year because she keeps having tantrums and flooding the place. I never went in there anyway if I could avoid it; it’s awful trying to have a pee with her wailing at you —”

“Look, food!” said Ron.

On the other side of the dungeon was a long table, also covered in black velvet. They approached it eagerly but next moment had stopped in their tracks, horrified. The smell was quite disgusting.

Large, rotten fish were laid on handsome silver platters; cakes, burned charcoal-black, were heaped on salvers; there was a great maggoty haggis, a slab of cheese covered in furry green mold and, in pride of place, an enormous gray cake in the shape of a tombstone, with tar-like icing forming the words,

SIR NICHOLAS DE MIMSY-PORPINGTON

DIED 31ST OCTOBER, 1492

Harry watched, amazed, as a portly ghost approached the table, crouched low, and walked through it, his mouth held wide so that it passed through one of the stinking salmon.

“Can you taste it if you walk through it?” Harry asked him.

“Almost,” said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

“I expect they’ve let it rot to give it a stronger flavor,” said Hermione knowledgeably, pinching her nose and leaning closer to look at the putrid haggis.

“Can we move? I feel sick,” said Ron.

They had barely turned around, however, when a little man swooped suddenly from under the table and came to a halt in midair before them.

“Hello, Peeves,” said Harry cautiously.

Unlike the ghosts around them, Peeves the Poltergeist was the very reverse of pale and transparent. He was wearing a bright orange party hat, a revolving bow tie, and a broad grin on his wide, wicked face.

“Nibbles?” he said sweetly, offering them a bowl of peanuts covered in fungus.

“No thanks,” said Hermione.

“Heard you talking about poor Myrtle,” said Peeves, his eyes dancing. “*Rude* you was about poor Myrtle.” He took a deep breath and bellowed, “OI! MYRTLE!”

“Oh, no, Peeves, don’t tell her what I said, she’ll be really upset,” Hermione whispered frantically. “I didn’t mean it, I don’t mind her — er, hello, Myrtle.”

The squat ghost of a girl had glided over. She had the glummiest face Harry had ever seen, half-hidden behind lank hair and thick, pearly spectacles.

“What?” she said sulkily.

“How are you, Myrtle?” said Hermione in a falsely bright voice. “It’s nice to see you out of the toilet.”

Myrtle sniffed.

“Miss Granger was just talking about you —” said Peeves slyly in Myrtle’s ear.

“Just saying — saying — how nice you look tonight,” said Hermione, glaring at Peeves.

Myrtle eyed Hermione suspiciously.

“You’re making fun of me,” she said, silver tears welling rapidly in her small, see-through eyes.

“No — honestly — didn’t I just say how nice Myrtle’s looking?” said Hermione, nudging Harry and Ron painfully in the ribs.

“Oh, yeah —”

“She did —”

“Don’t lie to me,” Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. “D’you think I don’t know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myrtle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!”

“You’ve forgotten pimply,” Peeves hissed in her ear.

Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and fled from the dungeon. Peeves shot after her, pelting her with moldy peanuts, yelling, “*Pimply! Pimply!*”

“Oh, dear,” said Hermione sadly.

Nearly Headless Nick now drifted toward them through the crowd.

“Enjoying yourselves?”

“Oh, yes,” they lied.

“Not a bad turnout,” said Nearly Headless Nick proudly. “The Wailing Widow came all the way up from Kent. . . . It’s nearly time for my speech, I’d better go and warn the orchestra. . . .”

The orchestra, however, stopped playing at that very moment. They, and everyone else in the dungeon, fell silent, looking around in excitement, as a hunting horn sounded.

“Oh, here we go,” said Nearly Headless Nick bitterly.

Through the dungeon wall burst a dozen ghost horses, each ridden by a headless horseman. The assembly clapped wildly; Harry started to clap, too, but stopped quickly at the sight of Nick’s face.

The horses galloped into the middle of the dance floor and halted, rearing and plunging. At the front of the pack was a large ghost who held his bearded head under his arm, from which position he was blowing the horn. The ghost leapt down, lifted his head high in the air

so he could see over the crowd (everyone laughed), and strode over to Nearly Headless Nick, squashing his head back onto his neck.

“Nick!” he roared. “How are you? Head still hanging in there?”

He gave a hearty guffaw and clapped Nearly Headless Nick on the shoulder.

“Welcome, Patrick,” said Nick stiffly.

“Live ’uns!” said Sir Patrick, spotting Harry, Ron, and Hermione and giving a huge, fake jump of astonishment, so that his head fell off again (the crowd howled with laughter).

“Very amusing,” said Nearly Headless Nick darkly.

“Don’t mind Nick!” shouted Sir Patrick’s head from the floor. “Still upset we won’t let him join the Hunt! But I mean to say — look at the fellow —”

“I think,” said Harry hurriedly, at a meaningful look from Nick, “Nick’s very — frightening and — er —”

“Ha!” yelled Sir Patrick’s head. “Bet he asked you to say that!”

“If I could have everyone’s attention, it’s time for my speech!” said Nearly Headless Nick loudly, striding toward the podium and climbing into an icy blue spotlight.

“My late lamented lords, ladies, and gentlemen, it is my great sorrow . . .”

But nobody heard much more. Sir Patrick and the rest of the Headless Hunt had just started a game of Head Hockey and the crowd was turning to watch. Nearly Headless Nick tried vainly to recapture his audience, but gave up as Sir Patrick’s head went sailing past him to loud cheers.

Harry was very cold by now, not to mention hungry.

“I can’t stand much more of this,” Ron muttered, his teeth chattering, as the orchestra ground back into action and the ghosts swept back onto the dance floor.

“Let’s go,” Harry agreed.

They backed toward the door, nodding and beaming at anyone who looked at them, and a minute later were hurrying back up the passageway full of black candles.

“Pudding might not be finished yet,” said Ron hopefully, leading the way toward the steps to the entrance hall.

And then Harry heard it.

“... rip ... tear ... kill ...”

It was the same voice, the same cold, murderous voice he had heard in Lockhart’s office.

He stumbled to a halt, clutching at the stone wall, listening with all his might, looking around, squinting up and down the dimly lit passageway.

“Harry, what’re you — ?”

“It’s that voice again — shut up a minute —”

“... soo hungry ... for so long ...”

“Listen!” said Harry urgently, and Ron and Hermione froze, watching him.

“... kill ... time to kill ...”

The voice was growing fainter. Harry was sure it was moving away — moving upward. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling; how could it be moving upward? Was it a phantom, to whom stone ceilings didn’t matter?

“This way,” he shouted, and he began to run, up the stairs, into the entrance hall. It was no good hoping to hear anything here, the babble of talk from the Halloween feast was echoing out of the Great Hall. Harry sprinted up the marble staircase to the first floor, Ron and Hermione clattering behind him.

“Harry, what’re we —”

“SHH!”

Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: “. . . *I smell blood*. . . . *I SMELL BLOOD!*”

His stomach lurched —

“It’s going to kill someone!” he shouted, and ignoring Ron’s and Hermione’s bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time, trying to listen over his own pounding footsteps —

Harry hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Ron and Hermione panting behind him, not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

“Harry, *what* was that all about?” said Ron, wiping sweat off his face. “I couldn’t hear anything. . . .”

But Hermione gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor.

“*Look!*”

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached slowly, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES

OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

“What’s that thing — hanging underneath?” said Ron, a slight quiver in his voice.

As they edged nearer, Harry almost slipped — there was a large puddle of water on the floor; Ron and Hermione grabbed him, and they inched toward the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. All three of them realized what it was at once, and leapt backward with a splash.

Mrs. Norris, the caretaker’s cat, was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring.

For a few seconds, they didn’t move. Then Ron said, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Shouldn’t we try and help —” Harry began awkwardly.

“Trust me,” said Ron. “We don’t want to be found here.”

But it was too late. A rumble, as though of distant thunder, told them that the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor where they stood came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people; next moment, students were crashing into the passage from both ends.

The chatter, the bustle, the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood alone, in the middle of the corridor, as silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight.

Then someone shouted through the quiet.

“Enemies of the Heir, beware! You’ll be next, Mudbloods!”

It was Draco Malfoy. He had pushed to the front of the crowd, his

cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat.

Die Doodsdagparty

Oktober kom en sprei 'n klam koue oor die terrein en tot in die kasteel. Madame Pomfrey, die matrone, word besig gehou deur 'n skielike vlag van verkoues onder die personeel sowel as die studente. Haar Kikkeropdrankie werk binne oomblikke, dis net dat daar ure later nog steeds rook deur jou ore borrel. Toe Ginny Weasley 'n bietjie knieserig lyk, boelie Percy haar tot sy daarvan drink. Die stoom wat onder haar helderrooi hare opslaan, laat dit lyk of haar kop aan die brand geslaan het.

Reëndruppels so groot soos koeëls dreun dag na dag teen die kasteel se vensters; die watervlak van die meer styg, die blombeddings verander in modderige strome en Hagrid se pampoene swel tot hulle so groot soos tuinhuisies is. Oliver Wood se entoesiasme vir gereelde oefensessies is egter nie geblus nie. Dit is die rede waarom Harry laat een stormagtige Saterdagmiddag, 'n paar dae voor Allerheiligeaand, terugstap na die Griffindor-toring, deurweek tot op die vel en vol modder.

Selfs sonder reën en wind sou dit allesbehalwe 'n lekker oefensessie gewees het. Fred en George, wat op die Slibberin-span gaan spioeneer het, het die spoed van die nuwe Nimbus Tweeduisend-en-een besems met hul eie oë gesien. Volgens hulle is die Slibberin-spanlede bloot sewe groenerige strepe wat soos stralers deur die lug jakker.

Toe Harry met plasgeluide in die verlate gang af slof, sien hy iemand wat net so ingedagte soos hy is. Nick-amper-sonder-kop, die spook van die Griffindor-toring, staar mistroostig deur 'n venster en mompel onderlangs, “. . . voldoen nie aan die vereistes . . . skaars twee sentimeter . . .”

“Hallo, Nick,” sê Harry.

“Hallo, hallo,” skrik Nick-amper-sonder-kop en kyk om. Hy dra 'n swierige, gepluimde hoed op sy lang, krullerige hare en 'n tuniek met 'n plooiakraag wat die feit verbloem dat sy kop amper heeltemal afgesny is. Hy is so bleek soos wasem en Harry kan die donker lug en die gietende reën daar buite regdeur hom sien.

“Jy lyk bekommerd, jong Potter,” sê Nick en vou 'n deursigtige brief toe en steek dit in sy binnesak.

“Jy ook,” sê Harry.

"Aha," Nick-amper-sonder-kop wuif met 'n elegante hand, "'n onbenulligheid . . . dis nie asof ek regtig wil aansluit nie . . . het wel aansoek gedoen, maar 'voldoen nie aan die vereistes nie'."

En syte van sy lughartige toon is daar 'n besonder bitter trek op sy gesig.

"Sou jy nie ook dink," bars hy skielik uit en haal die brief uit sy sak, "dat as jy vyf-en-veertig keer met 'n stomp byl teen die nek gekap is, jy tot die Koppejag toegelaat behoort te word nie?"

"O, ja, beslis," sê Harry, van wie dit klaarblyklik verwag word om saam te stem.

"Ek bedoel, niemand kon harder as ek vir 'n skoon hou gewens het en dat my kop *behoorlik* af moet wees nie, ek bedoel, ek sou eindelose pyn en bespotting gespaar gebly het. Maar . . ." Nick-amper-sonder-kop skud die brief oop en lees ergerlik,

"Ons kan slegs jagters toelaat wie se koppe heeltemal los van hul liggame is. U moet beseef dat dit andersins onmoontlik sal wees vir lede om deel te neem aan jagaktiwiteite soos Koppolo en Kopspeel te Perd. Dit is dus met opregte spyt dat ek u moet meedeel dat u nie aan ons vereistes voldoen nie. Met baie goeie wense, Sir Bartlett Appleby-Krust."

Nick-amper-sonder-kop prop die brief woedend in sy sak. Hy is vuurwarm.

"Twee sentimeter van vel en sening, Harry! Dis al wat my kop daar hou. Die meeste mense sal reken dis so goed as kopaf, maar nee, dis nie genoeg vir Sir Behoorlik Afgekapte-Krust nie."

Nick-amper-sonder-kop haal 'n paar keer diep asem en toe sê hy op 'n baie meer bedaarde toon, "So – wat krap aan jou? Iets waarmee ek kan help?"

"Nee," sê Harry. "Behalwe as jy weet waar ek sewe gratis Nimbus Tweeduisend-en-eens kan kry vir ons wedstryd teen Slibbe –"

Die res van Harry se sin word verdrink deur 'n skril gemiaau van iewers by sy enkels. Hy kyk af en staar vas in 'n paar oë, so groot en geel soos twee lampe. Dis mev. Norris, die uitgeteerde grys kat wat 'n soort gesant is van die opsigter, Argus Fillis, en hom bystaan in sy eindelose stryd teen die studente.

"Jy moet maak dat jy wegkom, Harry," sê Nick vinnig. "Fillis is in 'n vieslike bui. Hy het verkoue en die een of ander derdejaar het per ongeluk 'n spul paddaharsings teen kerker vyf se plafon gemors; hy's al die hele oggend besig om dit af te skrop, en as hy vir jou moet vang waar jy modder oor die hele plek staan en drup . . ."

"Goed," sê Harry en probeer wegkom van mev. Norris se beskuldigende oë af, maar hy het te lank gedraai. Dis of Argus Fillis deur 'n geheimsinnige krag na sy nare kat aangetrek word, want hy bars skielik, al hygend, deur 'n muurbehangsel net regs van Harry en kyk wild rond om

die oortreder te vang. Daar is 'n dik tartanserp om sy nek en sy neus is ekstra pers.

"Vullis!" skree hy sodat sy wange dril. Sy oë peul dreigend uit en hy wys na die modder wat van Harry se Kwiddieklere drup. "Modder en gemors oral! Ek het genoeg gehad daarvan, ek sê jou! Kom saam, Potter!"

Harry waai mistroostig vir Nick-amper-sonder-kop en stap af ondertoe agter Fillis aan. In die proses maak hy twee keer soveel modderspore op die vloer.

Harry was nog nooit tevore in Fillis se kantoor nie; dis 'n plek wat die meeste studente vermy. Die kamer is bedompig en sonder vensters en dit word verlig deur 'n enkele olielamp wat van die lae plafon af hang. 'n Flou geur van gebakte vis hang oor die plek. Teen die mure staan houtliasseerkabinette en Harry kan aan die etikette sien dat dit inligting bevat oor al die leerders wat Fillis al gestraf het. Daar is 'n hele laai net vir Fred en George Weasley. Teen die muur agter Fillis se lessenaar hang 'n blink gepoleerde versameling kettings en boeie. Dit is algemene kennis dat hy gedurig by Dompeldorius loop en soebat om die studente aan hul enkels van die plafon af te laat hang.

Fillis gryp 'n veerpen uit die houer op sy lessenaar en begin rondvreetel op soek na 'n stuk perkament.

"Drek," brom hy kwaai, "groot sissende drakedrek . . . paddabreins . . . rottederms . . . ek het genoeg gehad . . . gaan 'n voorbeeld maak . . . nou waar's die vorm . . . a . . ."

Hy haal 'n groot rol perkament uit sy laai, vou dit oop voor hom en druk sy lang swart veerpen in die inktot.

"Naam . . . Harry Potter. Misdaad . . ."

"Dit was net 'n bietjie modder!" sê Harry.

"Vir jou is dit dalk net 'n bietjie modder, boet, maar vir my is dit 'n ekstra uur se skrop," skree Fillis, terwyl 'n onplesierige druppel aan die punt van sy knopneus bewe. "Misdaad . . . bemors die kasteel . . . voorgestelde straf . . ."

Fillis vee oor sy stromende neus en staar skeeloog na Harry wat met ingehoue asem op sy vonnis staan en wag.

Net toe Fillis sy veerpen laat sak, hoor hulle 'n dawerende BOEF! op die plafon bo sy kantoor, wat die olielamp laat rittel.

"NURKS!" brul Fillis en gooi sy veerpen woedend neer. "Hierdie keer het ek jou, ek het jou!"

Sonder om eens na Harry te kyk, hardloop Fillis op groot plat pote by die deur uit met mev. Norris agterna.

Nurks, die skool se poltergeist, is 'n grinnikende laspos wat amok maak en verwoesting saai net vir die pret. Harry hou nie baie van Nurks nie, maar hy kan nie anders as om dankbaar te wees vir sy tydsberekening nie. As dit wat hy gedoen het, erg genoeg is (en dit klink asof hy

hierdie keer iets groots gebreek het), dan sal dit Fillis se aandag hopelik van Harry aftrek.

Harry reken egter dat hy sal moet wag tot Fillis terugkom, dus sak hy heer in die motgevrete stoel langs die lessenaar. Buiten die vorm wat Fillis halfpad ingevul het, is daar net een ander ding op die lessenaar: 'n groot, blink pers koevert waarop in silwer letters geskryf is. Harry loer vinnig na die deur om seker te maak dat Fillis nie op pad terug is nie, toe tel hy die koevert op en lees:

GOUTOOR

'n Beginnerskursus in
Beginnerstowerkursies

Harry maak die koevert nuuskierig oop en haal die vel perkament uit. In krullerige silwer letters staan daar geskryf:

Voel jy uit pas met die wêreld van moderne toorkuns?

Maak jy verskonings om nie te toor nie?

Is jy al ooit bespot oor jou treurige towerwerk?

Daar is 'n antwoord!

Goutoor is 'n splinternuwe, flatervrye, resultaat-gebaseerde, gousnap-kursus.

Honderde hekse en towenaars het al baat gevind by die Goutoor-metode!

Madame Z. Netel van Toorwater skryf:

"Ek kon towerspreuke glad nie onthou nie en my towerdrankies was 'n familiegrap!

Nou, na 'n Goutoor-kursus, is ek die middelpunt van aandag by partytjies en vriende smee my vir die resepsie van my Skitterende Sukses!"

Towenaar D.J. Prod van Didsbury sê:

"My vrou het my altyd afgejak oor my flou towerkursies, maar na net een maand van jul wonderlike Goutoor-kursus het ek haar in 'n jak verander. Dankie, Goutoor!"

Heeltemal gefassineer blaai Harry verder. Waarom op aarde wil Fillis 'n toorkursus doen? Beteken dit dat hy nie 'n regte towenaar is nie? Harry is net besig met Les Een: Hoe om jou Towerstaf vas te hou ('n Paar Nuttige Wenke) toe skuifelende voetstappe daar buite hom laat besef dat Fillis op pad terug is. Hy prop die perkament terug in die koevert en gooi dit op die tafel neer net toe die deur oopgaan.

Fillis lyk triomfantlik.

“Daardie verdwynende kabinet is ontsettend kosbaar!” sê hy selfvoldaan aan mev. Norris. “Hierdie keer sit Nurks se turf, jy sal sien.”

Sy oë val op Harry en dartel na die Goutoor-koevert wat, en Harry besef dit heeltemal te laat, ’n goeie halwe meter lê van waar dit oorspronklik was.

Fillis se bleek gesig word so rooi soos ’n baksteen. Harry staal homself vir die woedegolf wat oor hom gaan spoel. Fillis hobbels na die lessenaar, gryp die koevert en smyt dit in ’n laai.

“Het jy – het jy dit gelees – ?” stotter hy.

“Nee,” jok Harry gou.

Fillis se knopperige vingers is inmekaar verstrengel.

“As ek moet uitvind dat jy my persoonlike . . . nie dat dit myne is nie . . . is vir ’n vriend . . . maar hoe dit ook al sy . . . wat ook al die geval . . .”

Benoud staar Harry na hom. Hy het Fillis nog nooit so kwaad gesien nie. Sy oë peul uit, ’n spiertjie spring in een van sy pofferwange en die tartanserp laat hom nog rooier lyk.

“Goed . . . loop net . . . en nie ’n woord nie . . . nie dat . . . hoewel, as jy dit nie gelees het . . . loop, loop, ek moet ’n verslag oor Nurks skryf . . . trap . . .”

Heeltemal verstom oor sy geluk draf Harry by die kantoor uit, af in die gang en op boontoe. Om uit Fillis se kantoor te kom sonder dat jy gestraf is, moet ’n soort rekord wees.

“Harry! Harry! Het dit gewerk?”

Nick-amper-sonder-kop glip uit ’n klaskamer. Agter hom sien Harry die oorblyfsels van ’n groot swart-en-goue kabinet wat lyk of dit baie ver geval het.

“Ek het vir Nurks oorreed om dit reg bo Fillis se kantoor te gaan neergooi,” sê Nick. “Gedink dit kan dalk sy aandag aftrek –”

“Was dit jy?” sê Harry dankbaar. “Ja, dit het gewerk, ek het nie detensie gekry nie. Dankie, Nick!”

Saam-saam stap hulle in die gang af. Nick-amper-sonder-kop hou nog steeds Sir Bartlett se brief vas, sien Harry.

“Ek wens daar’s iets wat ek vir jou kan doen oor die Koppejag,” sê Harry.

Nick-amper-sonder-kop steek in sy spore vas en Harry loop regdeur hom. Hy wens hy het nie; dis soos om deur ’n yskoue stort te stap.

“Maar daar is iets wat jy vir my kan doen,” sê Nick opgewonde. “Harry – is dit te veel gevra as – maar nee, jy sal tog nie lus wees –”

“Waarvoor?” vra Harry.

“Wel, hierdie Allerheiligeaand is my vyfhonderdste doodsdag,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop waardig en rek homself uit tot sy volle lengte.

“O,” sê Harry en hy is nie seker of hy bly of hartseer moet lyk nie. “Reg.”

“Ek hou ’n partytjie in een van die groter kerkers. Vriende van regoor die land gaan kom. Dit sal so ’n eer wees as jy dit kan bywoon. Mnr. Weasley en mej. La Grange is natuurlik ook baie welkom – maar ek veronderstel jy sal eerder na die skool se fees wil gaan?” Hy hou Harry gespanne dop.

“Nee,” sê Harry vinnig, “ek sal kom –”

“My liewe kind! Harry Potter by my doodsdagparty! En,” hy steek vas en hy lyk baie opgewonde, “dink jy dat jy dalk teenoor sir Bartlett kan laat val hoe skrikwekkend en indrukwekkend jy dink ek is?”

“Ja – natuurlik,” sê Harry.

Nick-amper-sonder-kop straal.

“’n Doodsdagparty?” sê Hermien gretig toe Harry uiteindelik verkleef het en by haar en Ron in die geselskamer aansluit. “Ek wed daar is nie baie lewende mense wat al by so iets was nie – dit sal ontsettend interessant wees!”

“Hoekom wil iemand die dag toe hy doodgegaan het, vier?” sê Ron. Hy is nog nie halfpad deur sy Towerdrankie-huiswerk nie en hy is erg iese-grimmig. “Klink vrek vervelig vir my . . .”

Die reën hamer nog steeds teen die vensters wat nou inkswart is, maar binne lyk alles helder en kleurvol. Die lig van die vuur glim oor die talle sagte gemakstoele waarin mense sit en lees of gesels of huiswerk doen. Fred en George Weasley, daarenteen, probeer uitvind wat sal gebeur as ’n vuurvretende koggelmander ’n Vrijbouter-klapper sou eet. Fred het die helderoranje koggelmander, ’n spesie wat in vuur woon, uit die Versorging van Magiese Creature-klas “gered” en dit staan en smeul op ’n tafel, omring deur ’n klein skare nuuskierige mense.

Harry is op die punt om vir Ron en Hermien te vertel van Fillis en die Goutoor-kursus toe die koggelmander skielik, met ’n geklap en ’n gekraak en ’n gespetter van vonke, wild die lug in skiet en deur die vertrek seil. Die gesig van Percy, wat homself hees skree op Fred en George, die manjifieke vertoning van oranjerooi vonke wat uit die koggelmander se mond spat en sy uiteindelijke ontsnapping in die vuur, met gepaardgaande ontploffings, dryf alle gedagtes aan Fillis en die Goutoor-koever uit Harry se gedagtes.

Toe Allerheiligeaand aanbreek, is Harry spyt oor sy haastige belofte om na die Doodsdagparty te gaan. Die res van die skool sien almal uit na die Allerheiligefees; die Groot Saal is versier met die gewone lewende vlermuise, Hagrid se enorme pampoene is omskep in lanterns, so groot dat drie mense binne-in kan sit, en daar is gerugte dat Dompeldorius ’n geselskap dansende geraamtes gehuur het om te kom optree.

“’n Belofte is ’n belofte,” herinner Hermien vir Harry baasspelerig. “Jy het gesê dat jy na die Doodsdagparty sal gaan.”

Teen sewe-uur stap Harry, Ron en Hermien verby die deur na die vol Groot Saal, waar goue borde en kerse aanloklik glinster, en gaan af na die kerkers.

Die gang wat na Nick-amper-sonder-kop se party lei, is ook verlig deur kerse, hoewel die effek allesbehalwe vrolik is: hierdie kerse is lank en dun en pikswart met helderblou vlamme, wat 'n doodse en spookagtige lig gooi, selfs oor hulle lewende gesigte. Met elke tree word dit kouer. Harry bewee en trek sy kleed stywer om hom. Hy hoor 'n geluid wat klink soos wanneer 'n duisend vingernaels oor 'n enorme swartbord getrek word.

“Is dit veronderstel om *musiek* te wees?” fluister Ron. Hulle gaan om die hoek en sien Nick-amper-sonder-kop in 'n deur staan. Dit is behang met swart ferweeldrapeersels.

“My liewe vriende,” sê hy droefgeestig, “welkom, welkom . . . so bly julle kon kom . . .”

Hy haal sy gepluimde hoed met 'n swierige gebaar af en beduie al buigend dat hulle moet ingaan.

Dit is 'n ongelooflike gesig. Die kerker is vol van honderde pêrelwit, deursigtige mense, van wie die meeste op die oorvol dansvloer ronddryf en wals op die maat van die aaklige, beweringe klank van dertig musieksae. Die orkes sit eenkant op 'n platform wat met swart materiaal behang is. Die kandelaar bo hul koppe skitter met duisende swart kerse wat 'n middernagblou gloed oor alles gooi. Harry-hulle se asem hang soos mis voor hulle; dis of hulle by 'n vrieskas instap.

“Sal ons 'n bietjie rondkyk?” stel Harry voor, meer sodat sy voete kan warm word.

“Ons moet net nie *deur* iemand stap nie,” sê Ron senuagtig terwyl hulle al om die kant van die dansvloer hou. Hulle gaan verby 'n groepie droefgeestige nonne, 'n toingrige man in kettings en die Vet Monnik, 'n vrolike Hoesenproes-spook wat staan en gesels met 'n ridder deur wie se voorkop 'n pyl steek. Harry is nie verbaas om te sien dat die ander spoke padgee vir die Bloedige Baron nie. Hy is die uitgeteerde, starende Slibberin-spook en is vol silwerkleurige bloedvlekke.

“O nee,” sê Hermien, en steek skielik vas. “Gaan terug, gaan terug, ek wil regtig nie met Katryn Kermkous praat nie –”

“Wie?” sê Harry terwyl hulle vinnig terugval.

“Sy spook in een van die meisies se toilette op die eerste verdieping,” sê Hermien.

“Sy spook in 'n toilet?”

“Ja. Dis al meer as 'n jaar dat dit nie werk nie, want sy het gedurig woe-debuie en dan laat sy die plek oorstroom. Ek gaan nooit soontoe as ek dit kan help nie, dis aaklig as jy op die toilet sit en sy kom kerm in jou ore –”

“Kyk, kos!” sê Ron.

Aan die oorkant van die kerker staan 'n lang tafel wat ook met swart ferweel bedek is. Hulle gaan gretig nader, maar toe hulle naby kom, steek hulle vol walging vas. Dit ruik aaklig. Groot, verrotte visse lê op pragtige silwer borde; koekies, pikswart verbrand, is op skinkborde gestapel; daar is harslag wat krioel van wurms, 'n blok kaas vol groen muf, en in die middel, 'n enorme grys koek in die vorm van 'n grafsteen, met teeragtige versiersuiker wat die volgende woorde vorm:

Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington

Heengegaan op 31 Oktober, 1492

Harry kyk verstom hoe 'n vet spook na die tafel stap, laag afsak en dwarsdeur alles loop. Hy hou sy mond wydoop toe hy deur die stinkvrot salm stap.

“Kan jy dit proe as jy daardeur loop?” vra Harry vir hom.

“Amper,” sê die spook treurig en dryf eenkant toe.

“Hulle laat dit seker vrot word sodat dit meer geur kan hê,” sê Hermien terwyl sy haar neus toedruk en die verrotte harslag van naderby bekyk.

“Kom ons loop, ek is naar,” sê Ron.

Hulle het skaars omgedraai, of 'n klein mannetjie swiep uit onder die tafels en hang in die lug voor hulle.

“Hallo, Nurks,” sê Harry versigtig.

Anders as die ander spoke om hulle, is Nurks, die poltergeist, glad nie bleek en deurskynend nie. Hy dra 'n helderoranje partytjiehoed, 'n strikdassie wat in die rondte om sy nek draai en daar is 'n breë glimlag op sy agterbakse gesig.

“'n Snoepie?” sê hy soet en hou 'n bakkie vol gemufte grondboontjies voor hulle.

“Nee dankie,” sê Hermien.

“Het julle oor die arme Katryn hoor praat,” sê Nurks en sy oë dans. “Lelike goed wat julle oor die arme Katryn sê.” Hy haal diep asem en bulder, “HAAI, KATRYN!”

“Ag, nee, Nurks, moenie vir haar sê nie, sy sal vreeslik sleg voel,” fluister Hermien benoud. “Ek het dit nie so bedoel nie, ek gee nie om as sy – h'm, hallo, Katryn.”

Die spook van 'n vet meisie het tot by hulle gegly. Sy het die verdrietigste gesig wat Harry nog ooit gesien het. Dis half versteek agter tou-tjieshare en 'n dik përelagtige bril.

“Wat?” sê sy stroef.

“Hoe gaan dit, Katryn?” sê Hermien kastig vrolik. “Dis goed om jou 'n slaggie buite die kleedkamer te sien.”

Katryn snuif.

“Mej. La Grange het nou net van jou gepraat –” sê Nurks skelm in Katryn se oor.

“Net gesê – gesê – hoe goed jy vanaand lyk,” sê Hermien en gluur na Nurks.

Katryn kyk vol agterdog na Hermien.

“Julle spot met my,” sê sy en groot silwer trane dam op in haar klein, deursigtige ogies.

“Nee – regtig – het ek nie gesê hoe goed Katryn lyk nie?” sê Hermien terwyl sy vir Harry en Ron pynlik in die ribbes pomp.

“O ja . . .”

“Sy het . . .”

“Moenie vir my lieg nie.” Katryn snak na asem. Trane loop in strome oor haar gesig. Nurks verkneukel hom oor haar skouer. “Dink julle ek weet nie wat die mense agter my rug sê nie? Vet Katryn! Lelike Katryn! Mislike, kermende, klakous van ’n Katryn!”

“Jy’t van die puisies vergeet,” sis Nurks in haar oor.

Katryn Kermkous bars uit in gepynigde snikke en storm uit die kerker. Nurks skiet agterna en gooi haar met muwwe grondboontjies terwyl hy hard “Puisies! Puisies!” skree.

“Ag tog,” sê Hermien ontsteld.

Nick-amper-sonder-kop dryf deur die skare na hulle toe.

“Geniet julle dit?”

“O ja,” jok hulle.

“Nie ’n slegte opkoms nie,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop trots. “Die Wenende Weduwee het al die pad van Kent af gekom . . . dis amper tyd vir my toespraak, ek moet die orkes gaan waarsku . . .”

Op hierdie presiese oomblik hou die orkes egter op met speel. Hulle, en so ook al die ander in die kerker, bly doodstil en kyk opgewonde rond toe ’n jaghoring opklink.

“Ag, nee, hier kom hulle,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop bitter.

’n Dosyn spookperde bars deur die muur van die kerker, elkeen met ’n koplose ruit op sy rug. Die mense klap wild hande; tot Harry begin klap, maar hy hou dadelik op toe hy Nick se gesig sien.

Die perde galop tot in die middel van die dansvloer, steek vas, steier agteroor en kom af met kappende voorpote; ’n groot spook heel voor, wat sy bebaarde kop onder sy arm vashou, blaas op sy horing, spring van sy perd af, lig sy kop hoog in die lug sodat hy bo-oor die skare kan sien (almal lag) en, terwyl hy sy kop terug op sy skouers druk, stryk hy aan na waar Nick-amper-sonder-kop staan.

“Nick!” brul hy. “Hoe gaan dit? Hang die ou kop nog steeds aan ’n draadjie?”

Hy lag hartlik en slaan Nick-amper-sonder-kop op die blad.

“Welkom, Bartlett,” sê Nick stywerig.

"Lewendes!" sê sir Bartlett toe hy vir Harry, Ron en Hermien sien en hy spring kamma terug van verbasing, sodat sy kop weer eens afval (nou skree die mense van die lag).

"Baie snaaks," sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop stug.

"Moet julle nie aan Nick steur nie!" skreeu sir Bartlett se kop van die grond af. "Nog steeds omgekrap omdat ons hom nie aan die Jag wil laat deelneem nie! Maar my vaderland – kyk hoe lyk die vent –"

"Ek dink," sê Harry vinnig, na 'n betekenisvolle kyk van Nick, "dat Nick erg – skrikwekkend is en – enne –"

"Ha!" gil sir Bartlett se kop. "Wed hy't jou gevra om dit te sê!"

"As ek almal se aandag kan kry, dis tyd vir my toespraak!" sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop hard. Hy stap na die podium en gaan staan in 'n ysblou kollig.

"My liewe afgestorwe dames, here en vriende, dit is met leedwese dat ek . . ."

Niemand hoor veel meer as dit nie. Sir Bartlett en die res van die Koppejagters het so pas begin Kophokkie speel en almal draai soontoe om te kyk. Nick-amper-sonder-kop probeer moedig om sy gehoor se aandag te herwin, maar gee bes toe sir Bartlett se kop, onder luide toejuiging, verby hom vlieg.

Teen dié tyd is Harry bitter koud en honger.

"Ek kan nie veel meer hiervan verduur nie," klappertand Ron toe die orkes weer kermend begin speel en die spoke oor die dansvloer sweef.

"Kom ons loop," stem Harry saam.

Hulle retireer tot by die deur, knik en glimlag vir almal wat na hulle kyk en 'n oomblik later skarrel hulle met die gang vol swart kerse terug boontoe.

"Dalk is hulle nog nie klaar met die poeding nie," sê Ron hoopvol terwyl hulle by die trappe opstap na die ingangsportaal toe.

Net toe hoor Harry dit.

" . . . skeur . . . verslind . . . vermoor . . ."

Dis dieselfde stem, dieselfde koue, moordlustige stem wat hy in Lockhart se kantoor gehoor het.

Hy kom struikelend tot stilstand en gryp na die klipmuur, terwyl hy gespanne luister en op en af in die swak verligte gang kyk.

"Harry, wat gaan – ?"

"Dis weer daardie stem – bly 'n oomblik stil –"

" . . . sooo honger . . . vir so lank al . . ."

"Luister!" sê Harry dringend en Ron en Hermien vries en hou hom fyn dop.

" . . . moor . . . tyd om te moor . . ."

Die stem word dowwer en dowwer. Harry is seker dit beweeg weg van hulle af – boontoe. 'n Mengsel van vrees en opwinding spoel oor hom ter-

wyl hy na die donker plafon staar; hoe kan dit boontoe gaan? Is dit 'n spook vir wie klipdakke nie kan keer nie?

“Hierdie kant toe,” skree hy en begin hardloop, op met die trappe tot in die ingangsportaal. Dit help nie om te hoop dat hulle hier iets sal kan hoor nie, want die roesemoes van stemme wat van die feesmaal af kom, weergalm uit die Groot Saal. Harry hardloop met die marmertrappe op tot by die eerste verdieping en Hermien en Ron storm klaterend agterna.

“Harry, wat gaan ons –”

“SJJ!”

Harry spits sy ore. Iewers ver weg, op die verdieping reg bo hulle, hoor hy die stem. Dit word dowwer en dowwer: “ . . . *ek ruik bloed* . . . *EK RUIK BLOED!*”

Sy maag trek saam. “Dit gaan iemand doodmaak!” skree hy en sonder om hom aan Ron en Hermien se verwilderde gesigte te steur, nael hy die trappe drie-drie uit, terwyl hy sy bes doen om bo die geluid van sy voetstappe te luister.

Harry hol oral rond op die tweede verdieping, Ron en Hermien hygend agterna. Hulle stop nie totdat hulle om die hoek van die laaste, verlate gang is nie.

“Harry, wat gaan *aan*?” Ron vee die sweet van sy gesig af. “Ek hoor dan niks . . .”

Maar Hermien trek haar asem vinnig in en wys af in die gang.

“Kyk!”

Teen die muur voor hulle glinster iets. Hulle gaan stadig, versigtig, nader, hul oë op skrefies getrek in die duisternis. Teen die muur tussen twee vensters, in die lig van die vlamme fakkels en in groot letters glim hierdie woorde:

DIE KAMER VAN GEHEIMENISSE IS OOP.
VYANDE VAN DIE ERFGENAAM, PASOP.

“Wat’s daardie ding – wat onder die boodskap hang?” vra Ron en daar is ’n effense trilling in sy stem.

Toe hulle nader tree, gly Harry amper: daar is ’n yslike plas water op die vloer. Ron en Hermien gryp hom net betyds en hulle sluip nader aan die boodskap, hul oë vasgenael op die donker skaduwee wat onder die woorde hang. Al drie besef dadelik wat dit is, en spring verskrik terug.

Mev. Norris, die opsigter se kat, hang aan haar stert van die fakkelstut af. Sy is so styf soos ’n plank en haar oë is wyd en starend.

Vir ’n paar oomblikke roer niemand nie. Toe sê Ron benoud, “Kom ons maak dat ons wegkom.”

“Moet ons nie liewer probeer help nie –” begin Harry onbeholpe.

“Glo my,” sê Ron. “Dis beter dat niemand ons hier betrap nie.”

Maar dis te laat. 'n Gerammel soos donderweer in die verte maak dit duidelik dat die Fees so pas klaar is. Van albei kante van die gang kom die geluid van honderde voete wat die trappe uitklim en die harde en tevrede stemme van mense wat lekker geëet het; die volgende oomblik storm die studente van albei kante in die gang af.

Die gelag en gesels word eensklaps stil toe die voorste mense die hangende kat sien. Harry, Ron en Hermien staan alleen in die middel van die gang, terwyl stilte oor die studente daal en hulle nader druk om die grieselige gesig te sien.

Toe skree iemand van agter af deur die stilte.

“Vyande van die Erfgenaam, pasop! Die Modderbloeders is volgende aan die beurt!”

Dit is Draco Malfoy. Hy druk deur die skare tot hy heel voor is. Sy koue oë is vol lewe, sy andersins bloedlose gesig is blosend rooi en hy grynslag toe hy die lewelose kat sien hang.

CHAPTER NINE



THE WRITING ON THE WALL

What's going on here? What's going on?"

Attracted no doubt by Malfoy's shout, Argus Filch came shouldering his way through the crowd. Then he saw Mrs. Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he shrieked.

And his popping eyes fell on Harry.

"*You!*" he screeched. "*You!* You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll —"

"*Argus!*"

Dumbledore had arrived on the scene, followed by a number of other teachers. In seconds, he had swept past Harry, Ron, and Hermione and detached Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket.

“Come with me, Argus,” he said to Filch. “You, too, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger.”

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

“My office is nearest, Headmaster — just upstairs — please feel free —”

“Thank you, Gilderoy,” said Dumbledore.

The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking excited and important, hurried after Dumbledore; so did Professors McGonagall and Snape.

As they entered Lockhart’s darkened office there was a flurry of movement across the walls; Harry saw several of the Lockharts in the pictures dodging out of sight, their hair in rollers. The real Lockhart lit the candles on his desk and stood back. Dumbledore laid Mrs. Norris on the polished surface and began to examine her. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged tense looks and sank into chairs outside the pool of candlelight, watching.

The tip of Dumbledore’s long, crooked nose was barely an inch from Mrs. Norris’s fur. He was looking at her closely through his half-moon spectacles, his long fingers gently prodding and poking. Professor McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow, wearing a most peculiar expression: It was as though he was trying hard not to smile. And Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making suggestions.

“It was definitely a curse that killed her — probably the

Transmogrifian Torture — I've seen it used many times, so unlucky I wasn't there, I know the very countercurse that would have saved her. . . .”

Lockhart's comments were punctuated by Filch's dry, racking sobs. He was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs. Norris, his face in his hands. Much as he detested Filch, Harry couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for him, though not nearly as sorry as he felt for himself. If Dumbledore believed Filch, he would be expelled for sure.

Dumbledore was now muttering strange words under his breath and tapping Mrs. Norris with his wand, but nothing happened: She continued to look as though she had been recently stuffed.

“. . . I remember something very similar happening in Ouagadougou,” said Lockhart, “a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets, which cleared the matter up at once. . . .”

The photographs of Lockhart on the walls were all nodding in agreement as he talked. One of them had forgotten to remove his hair net.

At last Dumbledore straightened up.

“She's not dead, Argus,” he said softly.

Lockhart stopped abruptly in the middle of counting the number of murders he had prevented.

“Not dead?” choked Filch, looking through his fingers at Mrs. Norris. “But why's she all — all stiff and frozen?”

“She has been Petrified,” said Dumbledore (“Ah! I thought so!” said Lockhart). “But how, I cannot say. . . .”

“Ask *him!*” shrieked Filch, turning his blotched and tearstained face to Harry.

“No second year could have done this,” said Dumbledore firmly. “It would take Dark Magic of the most advanced —”

“He did it, he did it!” Filch spat, his pouchy face purpling. “You saw what he wrote on the wall! He found — in my office — he knows I’m a — I’m a —” Filch’s face worked horribly. “He knows I’m a Squib!” he finished.

“I never *touched* Mrs. Norris!” Harry said loudly, uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at him, including all the Lockharts on the walls. “And I don’t even know what a Squib *is*.”

“Rubbish!” snarled Filch. “He saw my Kwikspell letter!”

“If I might speak, Headmaster,” said Snape from the shadows, and Harry’s sense of foreboding increased; he was sure nothing Snape had to say was going to do him any good.

“Potter and his friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time,” he said, a slight sneer curling his mouth as though he doubted it. “But we do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn’t he at the Halloween feast?”

Harry, Ron and Hermione all launched into an explanation about the deathday party. “. . . there were hundreds of ghosts, they’ll tell you we were there —”

“But why not join the feast afterward?” said Snape, his black eyes glittering in the candlelight. “Why go up to that corridor?”

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry.

“Because — because —” Harry said, his heart thumping very fast;

something told him it would sound very far-fetched if he told them he had been led there by a bodiless voice no one but he could hear, “because we were tired and wanted to go to bed,” he said.

“Without any supper?” said Snape, a triumphant smile flickering across his gaunt face. “I didn’t think ghosts provided food fit for living people at their parties.”

“We weren’t hungry,” said Ron loudly as his stomach gave a huge rumble.

Snape’s nasty smile widened.

“I suggest, Headmaster, that Potter is not being entirely truthful,” he said. “It might be a good idea if he were deprived of certain privileges until he is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel he should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until he is ready to be honest.”

“Really, Severus,” said Professor McGonagall sharply, “I see no reason to stop the boy playing Quidditch. This cat wasn’t hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong.”

Dumbledore was giving Harry a searching look. His twinkling light-blue gaze made Harry feel as though he were being X-rayed.

“Innocent until proven guilty, Severus,” he said firmly.

Snape looked furious. So did Filch.

“My cat has been Petrified!” he shrieked, his eyes popping. “I want to see some *punishment!*”

“We will be able to cure her, Argus,” said Dumbledore patiently. “Professor Sprout recently managed to procure some Mandrakes. As soon as they have reached their full size, I will have a potion made

that will revive Mrs. Norris.”

“I’ll make it,” Lockhart butted in. “I must have done it a hundred times. I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep —”

“Excuse me,” said Snape icily. “But I believe I am the Potions master at this school.”

There was a very awkward pause.

“You may go,” Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

They went, as quickly as they could without actually running. When they were a floor up from Lockhart’s office, they turned into an empty classroom and closed the door quietly behind them. Harry squinted at his friends’ darkened faces.

“D’you think I should have told them about that voice I heard?”

“No,” said Ron, without hesitation. “Hearing voices no one else can hear isn’t a good sign, even in the Wizarding world.”

Something in Ron’s voice made Harry ask, “You do believe me, don’t you?”

“‘Course I do,” said Ron quickly. “But — you must admit it’s weird. . . .”

“I know it’s weird,” said Harry. “The whole thing’s weird. What was that writing on the wall about? *The Chamber Has Been Opened*. . . . What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know, it rings a sort of bell,” said Ron slowly. “I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts once . . . might’ve been Bill. . . .”

“And what on earth’s a Squib?” said Harry.

To his surprise, Ron stifled a snigger.

“Well — it’s not funny really — but as it’s Filch,” he said. “A Squib is someone who was born into a Wizarding family but hasn’t got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wizards, but Squibs are quite unusual. If Filch’s trying to learn magic from a Kwikspell course, I reckon he must be a Squib. It would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much.” Ron gave a satisfied smile. “He’s bitter.”

A clock chimed somewhere.

“Midnight,” said Harry. “We’d better get to bed before Snape comes along and tries to frame us for something else.”

For a few days, the school could talk of little else but the attack on Mrs. Norris. Filch kept it fresh in everyone’s minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the attacker might come back. Harry had seen him scrubbing the message on the wall with Mrs. Skower’s All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, but to no effect; the words still gleamed as brightly as ever on the stone. When Filch wasn’t guarding the scene of the crime, he was skulking red-eyed through the corridors, lunging out at unsuspecting students and trying to put them in detention for things like “breathing loudly” and “looking happy.”

Ginny Weasley seemed very disturbed by Mrs. Norris’s fate. According to Ron, she was a great cat lover.

“But you haven’t really got to know Mrs. Norris,” Ron told her bracingly. “Honestly, we’re much better off without her.” Ginny’s lip trembled. “Stuff like this doesn’t often happen at Hogwarts,” Ron assured her. “They’ll catch the maniac who did it and have him out of

here in no time. I just hope he's got time to Petrify Filch before he's expelled. I'm only joking —" Ron added hastily as Ginny blanched.

The attack had also had an effect on Hermione. It was quite usual for Hermione to spend a lot of time reading, but she was now doing almost nothing else. Nor could Harry and Ron get much response from her when they asked what she was up to, and not until the following Wednesday did they find out.

Harry had been held back in Potions, where Snape had made him stay behind to scrape tubeworms off the desks. After a hurried lunch, he went upstairs to meet Ron in the library, and saw Justin Finch-Fletchley, the Hufflepuff boy from Herbology, coming toward him. Harry had just opened his mouth to say hello when Justin caught sight of him, turned abruptly, and sped off in the opposite direction.

Harry found Ron at the back of the library, measuring his History of Magic homework. Professor Binns had asked for a three-foot-long composition on "The Medieval Assembly of European Wizards."

"I don't believe it, I'm still eight inches short. . . ." said Ron furiously, letting go of his parchment, which sprang back into a roll. "And Hermione's done four feet seven inches and her writing's *tiny*."

"Where is she?" asked Harry, grabbing the tape measure and unrolling his own homework.

"Somewhere over there," said Ron, pointing along the shelves. "Looking for another book. I think she's trying to read the whole library before Christmas."

Harry told Ron about Justin Finch-Fletchley running away from him.

"Dunno why you care. I thought he was a bit of an idiot," said Ron,

scribbling away, making his writing as large as possible. “All that junk about Lockhart being so great —”

Hermione emerged from between the bookshelves. She looked irritable and at last seemed ready to talk to them.

“*All* the copies of *Hogwarts: A History* have been taken out,” she said, sitting down next to Harry and Ron. “And there’s a two-week waiting list. I *wish* I hadn’t left my copy at home, but I couldn’t fit it in my trunk with all the Lockhart books.”

“Why do you want it?” said Harry.

“The same reason everyone else wants it,” said Hermione, “to read up on the legend of the Chamber of Secrets.”

“What’s that?” said Harry quickly.

“That’s just it. I can’t remember,” said Hermione, biting her lip. “And I can’t find the story anywhere else —”

“Hermione, let me read your composition,” said Ron desperately, checking his watch.

“No, I won’t,” said Hermione, suddenly severe. “You’ve had ten days to finish it —”

“I only need another two inches, come on —”

The bell rang. Ron and Hermione led the way to History of Magic, bickering.

History of Magic was the duller subject on their schedule. Professor Binns, who taught it, was their only ghost teacher, and the most exciting thing that ever happened in his classes was his entering the room through the blackboard. Ancient and shriveled, many people said he hadn’t noticed he was dead. He had simply got up to teach one day and left his body behind him in an armchair in front of the

staffroom fire; his routine had not varied in the slightest since.

Today was as boring as ever. Professor Binns opened his notes and began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in the class was in a deep stupor, occasionally coming to long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again. He had been speaking for half an hour when something happened that had never happened before. Hermione put up her hand.

Professor Binns, glancing up in the middle of a deadly dull lecture on the International Warlock Convention of 1289, looked amazed.

“Miss — er — ?”

“Granger, Professor. I was wondering if you could tell us anything about the Chamber of Secrets,” said Hermione in a clear voice.

Dean Thomas, who had been sitting with his mouth hanging open, gazing out of the window, jerked out of his trance; Lavender Brown’s head came up off her arms and Neville Longbottom’s elbow slipped off his desk.

Professor Binns blinked.

“My subject is History of Magic,” he said in his dry, wheezy voice. “I deal with *facts*, Miss Granger, not myths and legends.” He cleared his throat with a small noise like chalk snapping and continued, “In September of that year, a subcommittee of Sardinian sorcerers —”

He stuttered to a halt. Hermione’s hand was waving in the air again.

“Miss Grant?”

“Please, sir, don’t legends always have a basis in fact?”

Professor Binns was looking at her in such amazement, Harry was

sure no student had ever interrupted him before, alive or dead.

“Well,” said Professor Binns slowly, “yes, one could argue that, I suppose.” He peered at Hermione as though he had never seen a student properly before. “However, the legend of which you speak is such a very *sensational*, even *ludicrous* tale —”

But the whole class was now hanging on Professor Binns’s every word. He looked dimly at them all, every face turned to his. Harry could tell he was completely thrown by such an unusual show of interest.

“Oh, very well,” he said slowly. “Let me see . . . the Chamber of Secrets . . .

“You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago — the precise date is uncertain — by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution.”

He paused, gazed blearily around the room, and continued.

“For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more *selective* about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage,

believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school.”

Professor Binns paused again, pursing his lips, looking like a wrinkled old tortoise.

“Reliable historical sources tell us this much,” he said. “But these honest facts have been obscured by the fanciful legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story goes that Slytherin had built a hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing.

“Slytherin, according to the legend, sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic.”

There was silence as he finished telling the story, but it wasn’t the usual, sleepy silence that filled Professor Binns’s classes. There was unease in the air as everyone continued to watch him, hoping for more. Professor Binns looked faintly annoyed.

“The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course,” he said. “Naturally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible.”

Hermione’s hand was back in the air.

“Sir — what exactly do you mean by the ‘horror within’ the Chamber?”

“That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control,” said Professor Binns in his dry, reedy

voice.

The class exchanged nervous looks.

“I tell you, the thing does not exist,” said Professor Binns, shuffling his notes. “There is no Chamber and no monster.”

“But, sir,” said Seamus Finnigan, “if the Chamber can only be opened by Slytherin’s true heir, no one else *would* be able to find it, would they?”

“Nonsense, O’Flaherty,” said Professor Binns in an aggravated tone. “If a long succession of Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses haven’t found the thing —”

“But, Professor,” piped up Parvati Patil, “you’d probably have to use Dark Magic to open it —”

“Just because a wizard *doesn’t* use Dark Magic doesn’t mean he *can’t*, Miss Pennyfeather,” snapped Professor Binns. “I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore —”

“But maybe you’ve got to be related to Slytherin, so Dumbledore couldn’t —” began Dean Thomas, but Professor Binns had had enough.

“That will do,” he said sharply. “It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story! We will return, if you please, to *history*, to solid, believable, verifiable *fact!*”

And within five minutes, the class had sunk back into its usual torpor.

“I always knew Salazar Slytherin was a twisted old loony,” Ron told

Harry and Hermione as they fought their way through the teeming corridors at the end of the lesson to drop off their bags before dinner. “But I never knew he started all this pure-blood stuff. I wouldn’t be in his House if you paid me. Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had tried to put me in Slytherin, I’d’ve got the train straight back home. . . .”

Hermione nodded fervently, but Harry didn’t say anything. His stomach had just dropped unpleasantly.

Harry had never told Ron and Hermione that the Sorting Hat had seriously considered putting *him* in Slytherin. He could remember, as though it were yesterday, the small voice that had spoken in his ear when he’d placed the hat on his head a year before: *You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that.* . . .

But Harry, who had already heard of Slytherin House’s reputation for turning out Dark wizards, had thought desperately, *Not Slytherin!* and the hat had said, *Oh, well, if you’re sure . . . better be Gryffindor.* . . .

As they were shunted along in the throng, Colin Creevey went past.

“Hiya, Harry!”

“Hullo, Colin,” said Harry automatically.

“Harry — Harry — a boy in my class has been saying you’re —”

But Colin was so small he couldn’t fight against the tide of people bearing him toward the Great Hall; they heard him squeak, “See you, Harry!” and he was gone.

“What’s a boy in his class saying about you?” Hermione wondered.

“That I’m Slytherin’s heir, I expect,” said Harry, his stomach

dropping another inch or so as he suddenly remembered the way Justin Finch-Fletchley had run away from him at lunchtime.

“People here’ll believe anything,” said Ron in disgust.

The crowd thinned and they were able to climb the next staircase without difficulty.

“D’you *really* think there’s a Chamber of Secrets?” Ron asked Hermione.

“I don’t know,” she said, frowning. “Dumbledore couldn’t cure Mrs. Norris, and that makes me think that whatever attacked her might not be — well — human.”

As she spoke, they turned a corner and found themselves at the end of the very corridor where the attack had happened. They stopped and looked. The scene was just as it had been that night, except that there was no stiff cat hanging from the torch bracket, and an empty chair stood against the wall bearing the message “The Chamber of Secrets Has Been Opened.”

“That’s where Filch has been keeping guard,” Ron muttered.

They looked at each other. The corridor was deserted.

“Can’t hurt to have a poke around,” said Harry, dropping his bag and getting to his hands and knees so that he could crawl along, searching for clues.

“Scorch marks!” he said. “Here — and here —”

“Come and look at this!” said Hermione. “This is funny. . . .”

Harry got up and crossed to the window next to the message on the wall. Hermione was pointing at the topmost pane, where around twenty spiders were scuttling, apparently fighting to get through a small crack. A long, silvery thread was dangling like a rope, as

though they had all climbed it in their hurry to get outside.

“Have you ever seen spiders act like that?” said Hermione wonderingly.

“No,” said Harry, “have you, Ron? Ron?”

He looked over his shoulder. Ron was standing well back and seemed to be fighting the impulse to run.

“What’s up?” said Harry.

“I — don’t — like — spiders,” said Ron tensely.

“I never knew that,” said Hermione, looking at Ron in surprise. “You’ve used spiders in Potions loads of times. . . .”

“I don’t mind them dead,” said Ron, who was carefully looking anywhere but at the window. “I just don’t like the way they move. . . .”

Hermione giggled.

“It’s not funny,” said Ron, fiercely. “If you must know, when I was three, Fred turned my — my teddy bear into a great big filthy spider because I broke his toy broomstick. . . . You wouldn’t like them either if you’d been holding your bear and suddenly it had too many legs and . . .”

He broke off, shuddering. Hermione was obviously still trying not to laugh. Feeling they had better get off the subject, Harry said, “Remember all that water on the floor? Where did that come from? Someone’s mopped it up.”

“It was about here,” said Ron, recovering himself to walk a few paces past Filch’s chair and pointing. “Level with this door.”

He reached for the brass doorknob but suddenly withdrew his hand as though he’d been burned.

“What’s the matter?” said Harry.

“Can’t go in there,” said Ron gruffly. “That’s a girls’ toilet.”

“Oh, Ron, there won’t be anyone in there,” said Hermione, standing up and coming over. “That’s Moaning Myrtle’s place. Come on, let’s have a look.”

And ignoring the large OUT OF ORDER sign, she opened the door.

It was the gloomiest, most depressing bathroom Harry had ever set foot in. Under a large, cracked, and spotted mirror were a row of chipped sinks. The floor was damp and reflected the dull light given off by the stubs of a few candles, burning low in their holders; the wooden doors to the stalls were flaking and scratched and one of them was dangling off its hinges.

Hermione put her fingers to her lips and set off toward the end stall. When she reached it she said, “Hello, Myrtle, how are you?”

Harry and Ron went to look. Moaning Myrtle was floating above the tank of the toilet, picking a spot on her chin.

“This is a *girls’* bathroom,” she said, eyeing Ron and Harry suspiciously. “*They’re* not girls.”

“No,” Hermione agreed. “I just wanted to show them how — er — nice it is in here.”

She waved vaguely at the dirty old mirror and the damp floor.

“Ask her if she saw anything,” Harry mouthed at Hermione.

“What are you whispering?” said Myrtle, staring at him.

“Nothing,” said Harry quickly. “We wanted to ask —”

“I wish people would stop talking behind my back!” said Myrtle, in a voice choked with tears. “I *do* have feelings, you know, even if I

am dead —”

“Myrtle, no one wants to upset you,” said Hermione. “Harry only —”

“No one wants to upset me! That’s a good one!” howled Myrtle. “My life was nothing but misery at this place and now people come along ruining my death!”

“We wanted to ask you if you’ve seen anything funny lately,” said Hermione quickly. “Because a cat was attacked right outside your front door on Halloween.”

“Did you see anyone near here that night?” said Harry.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” said Myrtle dramatically. “Peeves upset me so much I came in here and tried to *kill* myself. Then, of course, I remembered that I’m — that I’m —”

“Already dead,” said Ron helpfully.

Myrtle gave a tragic sob, rose up in the air, turned over, and dived headfirst into the toilet, splashing water all over them and vanishing from sight, although from the direction of her muffled sobs, she had come to rest somewhere in the U-bend.

Harry and Ron stood with their mouths open, but Hermione shrugged wearily and said, “Honestly, that was almost cheerful for Myrtle. . . . Come on, let’s go.”

Harry had barely closed the door on Myrtle’s gurgling sobs when a loud voice made all three of them jump.

“RON!”

Percy Weasley had stopped dead at the head of the stairs, prefect badge agleam, an expression of complete shock on his face.

“That’s a *girls’* bathroom!” he gasped. “What were *you* — ?”

“Just having a look around,” Ron shrugged. “Clues, you know —”

Percy swelled in a manner that reminded Harry forcefully of Mrs. Weasley.

“Get — away — from — there —” Percy said, striding toward them and starting to bustle them along, flapping his arms. “Don’t you *care* what this looks like? Coming back here while everyone’s at dinner —”

“Why shouldn’t we be here?” said Ron hotly, stopping short and glaring at Percy. “Listen, we never laid a finger on that cat!”

“That’s what I told Ginny,” said Percy fiercely, “but she still seems to think you’re going to be expelled, I’ve never seen her so upset, crying her eyes out, you might think of *her*, all the first years are thoroughly overexcited by this business —”

“*You* don’t care about Ginny,” said Ron, whose ears were now reddening. “*You’re* just worried I’m going to mess up your chances of being Head Boy —”

“Five points from Gryffindor!” Percy said tersely, fingering his prefect badge. “And I hope it teaches you a lesson! No more *detective work*, or I’ll write to Mum!”

And he strode off, the back of his neck as red as Ron’s ears.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose seats as far as possible from Percy in the common room that night. Ron was still in a very bad temper and kept blotting his Charms homework. When he reached absently for his wand to remove the smudges, it ignited the parchment. Fuming almost as much as his homework, Ron slammed *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* shut. To Harry’s surprise, Hermione followed

suit.

“Who can it be, though?” she said in a quiet voice, as though continuing a conversation they had just been having. “Who’d *want* to frighten all the Squibs and Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts?”

“Let’s think,” said Ron in mock puzzlement. “Who do we know who thinks Muggle-borns are scum?”

He looked at Hermione. Hermione looked back, unconvinced.

“If you’re talking about Malfoy —”

“Of course I am!” said Ron. “You heard him — ‘*You’ll be next, Mudbloods!*’ — come on, you’ve only got to look at his foul rat face to know it’s him —”

“Malfoy, the Heir of Slytherin?” said Hermione skeptically.

“Look at his family,” said Harry, closing his books, too. “The whole lot of them have been in Slytherin; he’s always boasting about it. They could easily be Slytherin’s descendants. His father’s definitely evil enough.”

“They could’ve had the key to the Chamber of Secrets for centuries!” said Ron. “Handing it down, father to son. . . .”

“Well,” said Hermione cautiously, “I suppose it’s possible. . . .”

“But how do we prove it?” said Harry darkly.

“There might be a way,” said Hermione slowly, dropping her voice still further with a quick glance across the room at Percy. “Of course, it would be difficult. And dangerous, very dangerous. We’d be breaking about fifty school rules, I expect —”

“If, in a month or so, you feel like explaining, you will let us know, won’t you?” said Ron irritably.

“All right,” said Hermione coldly. “What we’d need to do is to get

inside the Slytherin common room and ask Malfoy a few questions without him realizing it's us."

"But that's impossible," Harry said as Ron laughed.

"No, it's not," said Hermione. "All we'd need would be some Polyjuice Potion."

"What's that?" said Ron and Harry together.

"Snape mentioned it in class a few weeks ago —"

"D'you think we've got nothing better to do in Potions than listen to Snape?" muttered Ron.

"It transforms you into somebody else. Think about it! We could change into three of the Slytherins. No one would know it was us. Malfoy would probably tell us anything. He's probably boasting about it in the Slytherin common room right now, if only we could hear him."

"This Polyjuice stuff sounds a bit dodgy to me," said Ron, frowning. "What if we were stuck looking like three of the Slytherins forever?"

"It wears off after a while," said Hermione, waving her hand impatiently. "But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. Snape said it was in a book called *Moste Potente Potions* and it's bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library."

There was only one way to get out a book from the Restricted Section: You needed a signed note of permission from a teacher.

"Hard to see why we'd want the book, really," said Ron, "if we weren't going to try and make one of the potions."

"I think," said Hermione, "that if we made it sound as though we were just interested in the theory, we might stand a chance. . . ."

“Oh, come on, no teacher’s going to fall for that,” said Ron.
“They’d have to be really thick. . . .”

Die Skrif teen die Muur

“Wat gaan hier aan? Wat gaan aan?”

Argus Fillis is besig om 'n pad deur die skare te baan. Hy moet Malfoy se geskree gehoor het. Toe hy vir mev. Norris sien, val hy beangs terug en sy hand vlieg vol walging na sy gesig.

“My kat! My kat! Wat het met mev. Norris gebeur?” gil hy.

Sy uitpeuloë val op Harry.

“Jy!” kryс hy. “Jy! Jy’t my kat vermoor! Jy’t haar vermoor! Ek sal jou doodmaak! Ek —”

“Argus!”

Dompeldorius het op die toneel verskyn, gevolg deur 'n paar ander onderwysers. Hy swiep vinnig verby Harry, Ron en Hermien en haak vir mev. Norris van die fakkelstut af.

“Kom saam, Argus,” sê hy vir Fillis. “Julle ook, mnr. Potter, mnr. Weasley, mej. La Grange.”

Lockhart tree gretig vorentoe.

“My kantoor is die naaste, meneer die skoolhoof — net op met die trappe — u kan dit gerus —”

“Dankie, Gilderoy,” sê Dompeldorius.

Die skare laat hulle in stilte verbystap. Lockhart lyk opgewonde en belangrik en haas hom agter Dompeldorius aan; professors McGonagall en Snerp volg ook.

Toe hulle Lockhart se donker kantoor binnegaan, is daar 'n geskarrel teen die mure; Harry sien hoe etlike van die Lockharts op die foto's wegkoes, hul hare in krullers. Die regte Lockhart steek die kerse op sy lesse-naar aan en tree agteruit. Dompeldorius sit mev. Norris op die blink oppervlak neer en begin om haar te ondersoek. Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk benoud na mekaar, dan gaan sit hulle op 'n paar stoele net buite die kring van kerslig, en kyk toe.

Die punt van Dompeldorius se lang, krom neus is skaars 'n sentimeter van mev. Norris se pels af. Hy bekyk haar deeglik deur sy halfmaanbrilglase, sy lang vingers druk en voel liggies. Professor McGonagall is amper net so laag oor mev. Norris gebuk; haar oë is op skrefies. Snerp staan

teug in die skaduwees agter hulle. Daar is 'n eienaardige uitdrukking op sy gesig: dis of hy sy bes doen om nie te glimlag nie. Lockhart dwaal tussen hulle rond en bied allerhande verklarings aan:

“Dit is beslis 'n vloek wat haar getref het – waarskynlik die Transmogrifiaanse Marteling. Ek het al so baie gesien hoe dit gebruik word, so jammer ek was nie daar nie, ek ken die presiese teenvloek wat haar sou kon red . . .”

Lockhart se kommentaar word die hele tyd onderbreek deur Fillis se droë, roggelende snikke. Hy lê vooroor in 'n stoel by die lessenaar, sy gesig in sy hande. Dis of hy nie na mev. Norris kan kyk nie. Harry kan Fillis nie verdra nie, maar hy voel tog 'n bietjie jammer vir hom, hoewel nie naastenby so jammer soos vir homself nie. As Dompeldorius vir Fillis glo, sal hy wat Harry is, beslis geskors word.

Nou mompel Dompeldorius eienaardige woorde onderlangs. Hy tik mev. Norris met sy towerstaf, maar niks gebeur nie: sy lyk nog steeds of sy so pas opgestop is.

“ . . . ek onthou toe iets soortgelyks in die Ouagadougou gebeur het,” sê Lockhart. “n Reeks aanvalle, die volle verhaal verskyn in my outobiografie. Ek was gelukkig daartoe in staat om amulette aan die dorpie se inwoners te gee wat die probleem dadelik opgelos het . . .”

Terwyl hy praat, knik die foto's teen Lockhart se mure instemmend. Een van hulle het vergeet om sy haarnet af te haal.

Uiteindelik kom Dompeldorius orent.

“Sy's nie dood nie, Argus,” sê hy sag.

Lockhart is besig om te tel hoeveel moorde hy al voorkom het en hou net daar op.

“Nie dood nie?” wurg Fillis dit uit en staar deur sy vingers na mev. Norris. “Maar hoekom is sy so – so styf en bevrore?”

“Sy is Versteen,” sê Dompeldorius (“Aha, so gedink!” sê Lockhart). “Hoe, kan ek nie sê nie . . .”

“Vra hom!” kryt Fillis dit uit en draai sy rooi en traanbevlekte gesig na Harry.

“Geen tweedejaar kan *dit* doen nie,” sê Dompeldorius beslis. “Dit is Donker Toorkrag in sy mees gevorderde –”

“Hy het, hy het!” spoeg Fillis dit uit en sy pofferige gesig word pers. “Jy't gesien wat hy op die muur geskryf het! Hy't in my kantoor gesien – hy weet ek is – ek is –” Fillis se mond werk aaklig. “Hy weet ek is 'n Sisser!” voltooi hy.

“Ek het nie aan mev. Norris *geraak* nie!” sê Harry hard, ongemaklik daarvan bewus dat almal na hom kyk, selfs die Lockharts teen die mure. “Ek weet nie eens wat 'n Sisser is nie.”

“Twak!” snou Fillis hom toe. “Hy't my Goutoor-brief gesien!”

“As ek iets mag sê, mnr. die skoolhoof,” sê Snerp vanuit die skaduwees

sodat Harry se gevoel van onheil verdiep; hy is seker daar is niks wat Snerp kan sê wat vir hom enige goed sal inhou nie.

“Potter en sy vriende was dalk bloot op die verkeerde plek op die verkeerde tyd,” sê Snerp en ’n nare laggie krul om sy mondhoeke, asof hy dit ten sterkste betwyfel, “maar ons het hier met baie eienaardige omstandighede te doen. Waarom was hulle hoegenaamd in die boonste gang? Hoekom was hulle nie by die Allerheiligefees nie?”

Harry, Ron en Hermien begin al drie tegelyk verduidelik dat hulle by ’n Doodsdagparty was, “. . . daar was honderde spoke, hulle kan vir julle sê dat ons daar was –”

“Hoekom is julle nie agterna na die fees nie?” sê Snerp en sy swart oë skitter in die kerslig. “Wat het julle in daardie gang gemaak?”

Ron en Hermien kyk na Harry.

“Want - want –” Harry se hart klop baie vinnig; dis of iets vir hom sê dat dit baie vergesog sal klink as hy moet sê hy is soontoe gelei deur ’n stem wat niemand anders kon hoor nie, “want ons was moeg en wou gaan slaap,” sê hy.

“Sonder enige aandete?” sê Snerp en ’n triomfantlike glimlag flikker oor sy benerige gesig. “Ek dink nie spoke voorsien voedsel by hul partytjies wat geskik is vir lewende mense nie.”

“Ons was nie honger nie,” sê Ron, net toe sy maag hard rammel.

Snerp se gemene glimlaggie word dieper.

“Professor, ek reken dat Potter allermins oop kaarte speel,” sê hy. “Dit is dalk ’n goeie idee om sekere van sy voorregte in te kort tot hy gereed is om die volle verhaal te vertel. Ek stel voor dat hy tydelik van Griffindor se Kwiddiekspan geskors word tot hy gereed is om die waarheid te vertel.”

“Werklik, Severus,” sê professor McGonagall ferm, “ek sien geen rede waarom die seun moet ophou Kwiddiek speel nie. Die kat is nie met ’n besemstok oor die kop geslaan nie. Daar is hoegenaamd geen bewyse dat Potter iets verkeerds gedoen het nie.”

Dompeldorius kyk ondersoekend na Harry. Sy vonkelende ligblou kykers laat dit vir Harry voel asof hy X-strale van hom neem.

“Onskuldig tot die teendeel bewys is, Snerp,” sê hy beslis.

Snerp lyk woedend. Fillis ook.

“My kat is Versteen!” gil hy en sy oë peul dreigend uit. “Ek wil sien dat iemand gestraf word!”

“Ons kan haar genees, Argus,” sê Dompeldorius geduldig. “Madame Spruit het onlangs daarin geslaag om alruine in die hande te kry. Sodra hulle volgroeid is, sal ek ’n towerdrankie laat maak wat mev. Norris ten volle sal laat herstel . . .”

“Ek sal dit maak,” val Lockhart hom in die rede. “Ek het dit seker al honderde kere gedoen, ek kan ’n alruin-laafdrankie met toe oë maak –”

“Verskoon my,” sê Snerp ysig, “maar sover ek weet is *ek* die Meester van Towerdrankies in hierdie skool.”

Daar is ’n ongemaklike stilte.

“Julle mag gaan,” sê Dompeldorius vir Harry, Ron en Hermien.

Hulle gaan so vinnig as wat hulle kan, sonder om te hardloop. Toe hulle ’n verdieping bo Lockhart se kantoor is, glip hulle by ’n leë klaskamer in en maak die deur saggies agter hulle toe. Harry loer benoud na sy vriende se somber gesigte.

“Dink julle ek moet gesê het van die stem wat ek gehoor het?”

“Nee,” sê Ron sonder aarseling. “Om stemme te hoor wat niemand anders kan hoor nie, is nooit ’n goeie teken nie, nie eens in die towerwêreld nie.”

Iets in Ron se stem laat Harry vra, “Jy glo my, of hoe?”

“Natuurlik glo ek jou,” sê Ron dadelik, “Maar – jy moet erken dit is vreemd . . .”

“Ek weet dit is vreemd,” sê Harry. “Die hele ding is vreemd. Wat beteken daardie geskryf teen die muur? Die Kamer van Geheimenisse is oop . . . wat beteken dit?”

“Weet jy, iewers lui daar ’n klokkie,” sê Ron stadig. “Ek dink iemand het my eenkeer iets vertel oor ’n soort geheime vertrek op Hogwarts . . . was dalk Bill . . .”

“En wat op aarde is ’n Sisser?” sê Harry.

Tot sy verbasing onderdruk Ron ’n proeslag.

“Wel – dis nie regtig snaaks nie – maar siende dat dit Fillis is . . .” sê hy. “’n Sisser is iemand wat in ’n towenaarfamilie gebore is, maar nie kan toor nie. Soort van teenoorgestelde van ’n towenaar met Moggelouers, maar Sissers is nogal ongewoon. As Fillis probeer om met ’n Goutoorkursus te leer toor, sou ek sê hy is beslis ’n Sisser. Dit kan baie dinge verklaar. Soos hoekom hy die studente so haat.” Ron glimlag tevrede. “Hy’s bitter.”

Iewers slaan ’n horlosie.

“Midernag,” sê Harry, “Ons moet bed toe gaan voor Snerp hier verbykom en ons oor iets anders in die moeilikheid probeer dompel.”

Vir ’n paar dae praat die skool oor niks anders as die aanval op mev. Norris nie. Fillis hou dit vars in almal se gedagtes deur op en af te stap op die plek waar sy aangeval is, asof hy dink dat die aanvaller sal terugkom. Harry het gesien hoe hy die boodskap teen die muur probeer afskrop met “Mev. Schuur se Veeldoelige Toorskoonmaakmiddel”, maar dit was tevergeefs; die woorde glinster nog net so helder teen die klipmuur. Wanneer Fillis nie die toneel van die misdaad patrolleer nie, sluip hy met rooi oë op en af in die gange en spring op onskuldige studente en probeer hulle detensie gee vir goed soos “hard asemhaal” en “gelukkig lyk”.

Ginny Weasley is baie ontsteld oor wat met mev. Norris gebeur het. Volgens Ron is sy 'n groot katliefhebber.

“Jy het nie regtig vir mev. Norris geken nie,” sê Ron vir haar. “Regtig, dit is beter vir ons sonder haar.” Ginny se lip bewe. “Sulke goed gebeur omtrent nooit by Hogwarts nie,” verseker Ron haar. “Hulle sal die ou malle wat dit gedoen het een van die dae vang en hier wegvat. Ek hoop net hy’t tyd om vir Fillis te Versteen voor hulle hom uitskop. Net ’n grappie –” voeg Ron haastig by toe Ginny bleek word.

Die aanval het ook op Hermien ’n uitwerking. Dis heeltemal normaal vir Hermien om baie te lees, maar nou doen sy feitlik niks anders nie. Harry en Ron kry ook nie veel reaksie uit haar toe hulle wil weet waarmee sy nou eintlik besig is nie, en dis eers die volgende Woensdag dat hulle uitvind.

Harry is teruggehou na die Towerdrankie-klas om buiswurms van die banke af skrop. Toe hy na ’n vinnige middagete by die trappe opstap om vir Ron in die biblioteek te kry, sien hy vir Justin Finch-Fletchley, die Hoesenproeser van Herbologie, na hom toe aankom. Harry het net sy mond oopgemaak om hom te groet, toe Justin hom sien, vinnig omdraai en spore maak in die teenoorgestelde rigting.

Harry kry vir Ron agter in die biblioteek. Hy is besig om sy huiswerk vir Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns af te meet. Professor Binns het gevra vir ’n meter lange opstel oor “Die Middeleeuse Byeenkoms van Europese Townaars”.

“Ek glo dit nie. Nog vytien sentimeter . . .” sê Ron woedend en los een punt van die perkament sodat dit terugspring in ’n rol, “en Hermien het al 1,26 meter gedoen en sy skryf klein.”

“Waar is sy?” vra Harry terwyl hy die maatband gryp en sy eie huiswerk ooprol.

“Iewers daar,” sê Ron en wys na die rakke, “sy soek nog ’n boek. Ek dink sy wil die hele biblioteek deurgelees hê voor Krismis.”

Harry vertel vir Ron hoe Justin Finch-Fletchley van hom af weggehardloop het.

“Weet nie hoekom jy jou daaroor bekommer nie. Ek dink hy’s so ietwat van ’n idioot,” sê Ron terwyl hy verder skryf en sukkel om sy letters so groot moontlik te maak. “Al daardie twak oor Lockhart wat kastig so wonderlik –”

Hermien kom uit agter die rakke. Sy lyk omgekrap, maar dis ook of sy uiteindelik gereed is om met hulle te praat.

“Al die eksemplare van *Hogwarts: ’n Oorsig* is uitgeneem,” sê sy en gaan sit langs Harry en Ron. “En daar’s ’n twee weke lange waglys. Ek wens ek het my eksemplaar saamgebring, maar dit kon nie in my tas kom saam met al daardie Lockhart-boeke nie.”

“Wat wil jy daarmee maak?” vra Harry.

“Presies wat al die ander daarmee maak,” sê Hermien. “Oplees oor die legende van die Kamer van Geheimenisse.”

“Wat’s dit?” sê Harry gou.

“Dis die probleem. Ek kan nie onthou nie.” Hermien byt haar lip. “En ek kan die storie nêrens anders kry nie –”

“Hermien, kan ek gou jou opstel lees,” sê Ron wanhopig, terwyl hy na sy horlosie kyk.

“Nee, jy kan nie,” sê Hermien, skielik kwaai. “Jy het tien dae gehad om dit klaar te maak.”

“Ek kort net tien sentimeter, ag, toe, man . . .”

Die klok lui. Ron en Hermien loop stry-stry vooruit na die klaskamer waar Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns gegee word.

Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns is die verveligste vak op hul rooster. Professor Binns is die enigste spook wat klas gee, en die mees opwindende ding wat ooit in sy klas gebeur, is wanneer hy die vertrek deur die skryfbord binnekom. Hy is horingoud en vol plooië en baie mense reken hy weet nie eens dat hy dood is nie. Hy het op ’n dag opgestaan om te gaan klas gee en sy liggaam net eenvoudig in ’n leunstoel voor die vuur in die personeelkamer gelos; sy roetine is nog altyd dieselfde.

Vandag is net so vervelig soos altyd. Professor Binns vou sy notas oop en lees in ’n eentonige dreunstem, wat soos ’n ou stofsuier klink, tot almal in die klas halfbedwelmd is. Nou en dan kom hulle effens by, net lank genoeg om ’n datum of ’n naam neer te skryf, dan dommel hulle weer in. Hy praat al ’n goeie halfuur toe iets gebeur wat nog nooit tevore gebeur het nie. Hermien steek haar hand op.

Professor Binns kyk verbaas op. Hy is in die middel van ’n uiters vervelige lesing oor die Internasionale Towenaarskonvensie van 1289.

“Juffrou – h’m – ?”

“La Grange, professor. Ek het gewonder of u ons iets oor die Kamer van Geheimenisse kan vertel,” sê Hermien in ’n helder stem.

Dean Thomas, wat met ’n oop mond deur die venster sit en staar het, ruk wakker uit sy beswyming; Hildegard Braun lig haar kop van haar arms af op en Neville se elmboog glip van sy bank af.

Professor Binns knipper sy oë.

“My vak is Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns,” sê hy in ’n dun, aambors-tige stemmetjie. “Ek werk met *feite*, mej La Grange, nie met mites en legendes nie.” Hy maak keel skoon met klein, kort geluidjies wat klink soos kryt wat breek, en gaan dan voort, “In September van daardie jaar het ’n subkomitee van Sardiniese towenaars –”

Hy word stotterend stil. Hermien se hand waai weer in die lug.

“Juffrou La Grange?”

“Asseblief, professor, het legendes nie altyd ’n basis in *feite* nie?”

Professor Binns staar verbaas na haar. Harry is seker geen student,

dood of lewend, het hom al ooit tevore in die rede geval nie.

“Wel,” sê professor Binns stadig, “ja, ’n mens kan seker so sê.” Hy tuur na Hermien asof hy ’n student nog nooit tevore werklik raak gesien het nie. “Dis net dat die legende waarna jy verwys, so ’n buitengewoon *sensasionele*, selfs *belaglike* verhaal is –”

Nou hang die hele klas aan professor Binns se lippe. Hy kyk so half dowwerig na hulle; elke gesig is na syne gedraai. Harry kan sien dat hy heeltemal oorweldig voel deur hierdie ongewone belangstelling.

“Nou maar goed,” sê hy stadig. “Laat ek sien . . . die Kamer van Geheimenisse . . .

“Julle weet natuurlik almal dat Hogwarts meer as ’n duisend jaar gelede gestig is – die presiese datum is onbekend – deur vier van die grootste towenaars en hekse van alle tye. Die vier skoolhuise is na hulle ver- noem: Godric Griffindor, Helga Hoesenproes, Rowena Raweklou en Sa- lazar Slibberin. Hulle het saam hierdie kasteel opgerig, ver verwyder van die oë van nuuskierige Moggels, want dit was ’n era toe towerkuns deur die gewone mense gevrees is en hekse en towenaars kwaai vervolgd is.”

Hy breek af, staar leepogig rond in die vertrek en gaan dan voort, “Vir ’n hele paar jaar het die stigters in harmonie saamgewerk en jongmense uitgesoek wat tekens van towermagte toon en vir hul opvoeding na die kasteel gebring. Maar onderonsies het opgevlam tussen hulle. ’n Breuk het ontstaan tussen Slibberin en die ander drie. Slibberin wou meer *selek- tief* te werk gaan by die keuse van studente vir Hogwarts. Hy het geglo dat tooronderrig binne die toenaarfamilies gehou moet word. Hy het studente met Moggelouers gewantrou en gereken dat hulle onbetroubaar is. Met verloop van tyd het Slibberin en Griffindor in ’n ernstige argu- ment gewikkel geraak en Slibberin het die skool verlaat.”

Weer hou professor Binns vir ’n paar oomblikke op met praat. Hy pers sy lippe saam tot hy soos ’n verrimpelde ou skilpad lyk.

“Betroubare historiese bronne vertel ons die feite sover,” sê hy, “maar hierdie eerlike feite is verdoesel deur die fantastiese legende van die Ka- mer van Geheimenisse. Volgens hierdie verhaal het Slibberin ’n versteek- te vertrek binne-in die kasteel gebou, ’n vertrek waarvan die ander stig- ters niks geweet het nie.

“Volgens die legende het Slibberin die Kamer van Geheimenisse ver- seël sodat niemand dit kan oopmaak nie, behalwe sy eie ware erfgenaam, wanneer dié na die skool sou kom. Slegs die erfgenaam kan die seël voor die Kamer van Geheimenisse breek en die gruwels wat binne-in versteek is, loslaat en gebruik om die skool te suiwer van diegene wat dit nie werd is om die towerkuns te bestudeer nie.”

Toe hy die storie klaar vertel het, hang daar ’n diep stilte oor die klas. Dis nie die gewone slaperige stilte wat normaalweg in professor Binns se klasse heers nie. Daar is ’n onrustigheid in die lug. Almal hou hom dop

en hoop dat hy nog meer gaan vertel. Professor Binns lyk so ietwat vererg.

“Die hele ding is natuurlik die grootste klomp bog,” sê hy. “Uit die aard van die saak is die skool deeglik deursoek vir enige teken van so ’n vertrek, en wel deur hoogs geleerde hekse en towenaars. Dit bestaan nie. Dis ’n verhaal wat vertel word om liggelowiges die skrik op die lyf te jaag.”

Hermien se hand is weer in die lug.

“Professor – presies wat het u bedoel met die ‘gruwels’ binne-in die Kamer?”

“Daar word geglo dat die een of ander soort monster daar binne gehou word en dat net Slibberin se erfgenaam dit kan beheer,” sê professor Binns in sy dun stemmetjie.

Die klas kyk senuagtig na mekaar.

“Ek sê weer vir julle, die ding bestaan nie,” sê professor Binns en skuifel sy notas rond. “Daar is nie ’n Kamer of ’n monster nie.”

“Maar professor,” sê Septimus Floris, “as die Kamer net deur Slibberin se ware erfgenaam oopgemaak kan word, dan kan niemand anders dit mos kry nie, of hoe?”

“Twak, Fleuris,” sê professor Binns ergerlik. “As ’n lang opeenvolging van Hogwarts skoolhoofde die ding nie kon kry nie –”

“Maar professor,” sê Parvati Patel, “’n mens moet seker Donker Towermagte gebruik om dit oop te maak –”

“Net omdat ’n towenaar *nie* Donker Towermagte gebruik nie, beteken dit nie dat hy nie *kan* nie, juffrou Pastel,” snou professor Binns haar toe. “Ek herhaal, as iemand van die kaliber van Dompeldorius –”

“Maar miskien moet ’n mens familie wees van Slibberin, daarom dat Dompeldorius nie –” begin Dean Thomas, maar professor Binns het genoeg gehad.

“Dit sal al wees,” sê hy skerp. “Dit is ’n mite! Dit bestaan nie! Daar is nie die geringste bewys dat Slibberin eens ’n geheime besemkas gebou het nie! Dit spyt my dat ek hierdie verspote verhaal aan julle vertel het! Ons sal ons nou weer by geskiedenis bepaal, soliede, geloofwaardige, bewysbare *feite!*”

Binne vyf minute is die klas soos gewoonlik opnuut vas aan die slaap.

“Ek het nog altyd geweet Salazar Slibberin was ’n getikte ou maljan,” sê Ron vir Harry en Hermien toe hulle aan die einde van die klas ’n pad oopveg deur die stampvol gange om hul tasse voor aandete te gaan neersit. “Maar ek net nie geweet dis hy wat met hierdie volbloedtwak begin het nie. Ek sal nie in sy huis wou wees nie, al betaal jy my. Sowaar, as die Sorteelhoed darem vir my in Slibberin probeer sit het, het ek die eerste die beste trein terug huis toe gevat . . .”

Hermien knik met oorgawe, maar Harry sê nie 'n woord nie. Sy maag het so pas onplesierig gesink.

Harry het nooit vir Ron en Hermien vertel dat die Sorteelhoed dit ernstig oorweeg het om hom in Slibberin te sit nie. Hy onthou dit soos gister, die klein stemmetjie wat in sy oor gepraat het toe hy die hoed 'n jaar gelede op sy kop moes sit.

"Jy kan groot wees, weet jy, dis alles daar in jou kop en Slibberin sal jou help, dit ly geen twyfel nie . . ."

Maar Harry, wat reeds van Huis Slibberin se reputasie gehoor en geweet het dat die meeste donker towenaars en hekse uit Slibberin kom, het wanhopig gedink, "Net nie Slibberin nie!" en die hoed het gesê, "Nee? Wel, as jy seker is . . . dan maak ons dit Griffindor . . ."

Terwyl hulle deur die mense druk, kom Colin Creevey verby.

"Haai, Harry!"

"Hallo, Colin," sê Harry outomaties.

"Harry – Harry – 'n seun in my klas het gesê jy's –"

Maar Colin is so klein dat hy nie teen die stroom mense wat hom na die Groot Saal toe sleep, kan veg nie; hulle hoor net hoe hy skree, "Sien jou, Harry!" en toe is hy weg.

"Wat sou die seun in sy klas oor jou gesê het?" wonder Hermien.

"Seker dat ek Slibberin se erfgenaam is," sê Harry en sy maag val nog verder toe hy skielik onthou hoe Justin Finch-Fletchley voor middagete van hom af weggehardloop het.

"Party mense sal ook enigiets glo," sê Ron verontwaardig.

Daar is nou heelwat minder mense en hulle kan sonder verdere probleme by die trappe op.

"Dink jy regtig daar is 'n Kamer van Geheimenisse?" vra Ron vir Hermien.

"Ek weet nie," sê sy met 'n frons. "Dompeldorius kon nie vir mev. Norris regmaak nie en dit laat my dink dat wat haar ook al aangeval het, dalk nie – wel – 'n mens is nie."

Soos sy praat, gaan hulle om die hoek en bevind hulself in die presiese gang waar die aanval plasgevind het. Hulle gaan staan om te kyk. Die toneel lyk nog net soos daardie nag, behalwe dat daar nie meer 'n stywe kat van die fakkelstut af hang nie en dat 'n stoel teen die muur staan, reg onder die woorde "Die Kamer is Oopgemaak".

"Dis waar Fillis wag gehou het," mompel Ron.

Hulle kyk na mekaar. Die gang is verlate.

"Kan seker nie kwaad doen om 'n bietjie rond te kyk nie," sê Harry. Hy sit sy tas neer en sak af op sy hande en knieë, sodat hy kan rondkruip om leidrade te soek.

"Skroeimerke!" sê hy. "Hier – en hier –"

"Kom kyk hierna!" sê Hermien. "Dis snaaks . . ."

Harry staan op en stap na die venster langs die boodskap teen die muur. Hermien wys na die boonste ruit waar 'n stuk of twintig spinnekoppe rondskarrel. Dit lyk of hulle baklei om deur 'n klein krakie in die glas te kruip. 'n Lang silwer draad hang soos 'n tou, nes of hulle almal daarteen uitgeklim het in hul haas om buite te probeer kom.

"Het julle al ooit gesien dat spinnekoppe so maak?" vra Hermien verward.

"Nee," sê Harry, "het jy, Ron? Ron?"

Hy kyk oor sy skouer. Ron staan 'n hele ent daarvandaan en dit lyk of hy met homself moet baklei om nie voet in die wind te slaan nie.

"Wat gaan met jou aan?" vra Harry.

"Ek – hou – nie – van – spinnekoppe – nie," sê Ron gespanne.

"Ek het dit nie geweet nie," sê Hermien en kyk verbaas na Ron. "Jy't tog al baie keer spinnekoppe in towerdrankies en goed gebruik –"

"Ek gee nie om as hulle dood is nie," sê Ron, wat nou glad nie na die venster kan kyk nie. "Ek hou nie van die manier wat hulle beweeg nie . . ."

Hermien giggel.

"Dis nie snaaks nie," sê Ron vererg. "As jy dan moet weet, toe ek drie was, het Fred my – my teddiebeer in 'n vieslike groot spinnekop verander toe ek sy speelgoedbesemstok gebreek het. Hoe sal jy daarvan hou as jy nog ewe lekker jou beertjie staan en vashou en skielik het dit 'n spul harige bene en . . ."

Hy breek sidderend af. Hermien probeer duidelik hard om nie te lag nie. Harry voel dis dalk beter om die onderwerp te verander en sê, "Ont-hou julle al daardie water op die vloer? Waarvandaan sou dit gekom het? Ek sien iemand het dit opgevee."

"Dit was hier rond," sê Ron en ruk homself reg. Hy loop 'n paar tree verby Fillis se stoel en wys. "Regoor hierdie deur."

Hy steek 'n hand uit na die koperdeurknop, maar trek sy hand ewe skielik weer terug, nes of dit hom gebrand het.

"Wat gaan aan?" vra Harry.

"Kan nie hier ingaan nie," sê Ron kortaf, "dis die meisies se kleedkamer."

"Ag, Ron, daar is nou niemand nie." Hermien staan op en stap nader. "Dis Katryn Kermkous se plek. Kom ons gaan kyk wat daar aangaan."

Sy maak die deur oop sonder om haar aan die groot "Buite Werking"-teken te steur.

Dit is die somberste en mees mistroostige badkamer waarin Harry nog ooit was. Onder 'n groot gekraakte en gevlekte spieël is 'n hele ry afgesplinterde klipwasbakke. Die vloer is klam en weerkaats die dowwe lig wat afgegee word deur 'n paar stomp kerse wat laag in hul blakers brand; die houtdeure voor die hokkies het skraapmerke en dop af, en een van hulle hang net aan een skarnier.

Hermien hou haar vingers teen haar lippe en sit af na die laaste hokkie. Toe sy daar kom, sê sy, "Hallo, Katryn, hoe gaan dit met jou?"

Harry en Ron gaan nader om te kyk. Katryn Kermkous dryf in die toilet se waterbak. Sy druk aan 'n puisie op haar ken.

"Dit is 'n kleedkamer vir *meisies*," sê sy en staar agterdogtig na Ron en Harry. "*Hulle* is nie meisies nie."

"Nee," stem Hermien saam. "Ek wil net vir hulle wys hoe – h'm – lekker dit hier binne is."

Sy waai vaagweg in die rigting van die vuil ou spieël en die klam vloer.

"Vra haar of sy iets gesien het." Harry vorm die woorde met sy lippe vir Hermien.

"Wat fluister julle so?" sê Katryn en staar na hom.

"Niks," sê Harry vinnig. "Ons wil net weet –"

"Ek wens mense wil nie agter my rug skinder nie!" sê Katryn in 'n stem wat vol tranes is. "Ek *het* gevoelens, weet julle, al is ek dood."

"Katryn, niemand wil jou ontstel nie," sê Hermien. "Harry wil net –"

"Niemand wil my ontstel nie! Dis 'n mooi grap!" huil Katryn. "My lewe was niks anders as ellende in hierdie plek nie en nou kom mense hierheen en ruïneer my dood ook nog!"

"Ons wil net weet of jy nie dalk onlangs iets snaaks gesien het nie," sê Hermien vinnig. "Jy sien, op Allerheiligeaand is 'n kat hier buite voor jou deur aangeval."

"Het jy daardie aand dalk iemand hier rond gesien?" vra Harry.

"Ek het nie opgelet nie," sê Katryn dramaties. "Nurks het my so ontstel dat ek hierheen gekom het om myself *dood* te maak. Toe onthou ek natuurlik dat ek – dat ek –"

"Reeds dood is," sê Ron hulpvaardig.

Katryn snik tragies, styg op in die lug, draai om en duik kop eerste in die toilet sodat die water oor hulle spat, en verdwyn buite sig. Uit die rigting van waar haar gesmoorde snikke kom, lei hulle af dat sy iewers in die U-buiging sit.

Harry en Ron se monde hang wyd oop, maar Hermien lig haar skouers gelate en sê, "Ek sê vir julle, dis amper vrolik vir Katryn . . . kom ons loop."

Harry het die deur skaars op Katryn se gorrelende snikke toegemaak, of 'n harde stem laat hulle wip van die skrik.

"RON!"

Percy Weasley staan botstil aan die bopunt van die trappe, sy prefekwapentjie blink en skitter en daar is 'n uitdrukking van volslae skok op sy gesig.

"Dit is 'n kleedkamer vir *meisies*!" sis hy. "Wat *doen* jy – ?"

"Net rondgekyk," sê Ron en lig sy skouers. "Leidrade, weet jy . . ."

Percy swel op 'n manier wat Harry aan mev. Weasley laat dink.

“Maak – dat – julle – wegkom –” sê hy en marsjeer op hulle af en jaag hulle met flappende arms weg. “Gee julle nie om hoe dit lyk nie? Om hierheen te kom terwyl almal eet . . .”

“Hoekom kan ons nie hierheen kom nie?” sê Ron ergerlik, terwyl hy skielik vassteek en na Percy staar. “Luister, ons het nie aan daardie kat geëraak nie!”

“Dis wat ek vir Ginny gesê het,” sê Percy kwaai, “maar sy dink nog steeds dat julle geskors gaan word; ek het haar nog nooit so ontsteld gesien nie, sy huil omtrent haar oë uit. Julle kan gerus ’n slaggie aan haar dink, al die eerstejaars is totaal opgewen oor die hele besigheid en –”

“Jy voel vere vir Ginny,” sê Ron wie se ore besig is om rooi te word. “Al waaroor jy jou bekommer, is dat ek jou kanse om Hoofseun te word gegaan bederf.”

“Vyf punte van Griffindor af!” sê Percy bruusk en vat-vat aan sy preëkwapentjie. “En laat dit vir jou ’n les wees! Niks meer *speurwerk* nie, of elk skryf vir Ma!”

Met dié stap hy weg; die agterkant van sy nek net so rooi soos Ron se ore.

Daardie aand kies Harry, Ron en Hermien stoele in die geselskamer wat so ver moontlik van Percy af is. Ron is nog steeds in ’n slegte bui en maak aanmekaar kladde op sy Towerspel-huiswerk. Toe hy sy towerstaf ingedlagte optel om die kolle uit te haal, steek die staf die perkament aan die brand. Ron gloei amper rooier as sy huiswerk. Hy klap *Die Standaard-handleiding vir Goëlery, Graad 2* toe. Tot Harry se verbasing volg Hermien sy voorbeeld.

“Wie kan dit wees?” sê sy stilweg, asof sy bloot ’n gesprek voortsit. “Wie wil so graag hê dat al die Sissers en Moggel-nasate uit Hogwarts moet padgee?”

“Kom ons dink,” sê Ron, kastig peinsend. “Wie is daar wat ons ken wat dink dat alle Moggels skuim is?”

Hy kyk na Hermien. Hermien kyk na hom. Sy lyk nie oortuig nie.

“As jy Malfoy bedoel –”

“Natuurlik bedoel ek hom!” sê Ron. “Jy’t hom gehoor: ‘*Die Modderbloeders is volgende aan die beurt!*’ Komaan, ’n mens moet net na sy vieslike rotgesig kyk om te weet dit is hy –”

“Malfoy, die Erfgenaam van Slibberin?” sê Hermien skepties.

“Kyk na sy familie,” sê Harry terwyl hy ook sy boeke toemaak. “Die hele spul van hulle was in Slibberin, hy spog altyd daarmee. Hulle kan maklik Slibberin se nasate wees. Sy pa is beslis boos genoeg.”

“Hulle kan die sleutel na die Kamer van Geheimenisse al eeue lank hê,” sê Ron. “Dalk word dit aangegee van pa na seun . . .”

“Wel,” sê Hermien versigtig, “dit is seker moontlik . . .”

“Maar hoe bewys ’n mens dit?” sê Harry somber.

“Daar is dalk ’n manier,” sê Hermien stadig en haar stem word nog meer gedemp nadat sy vinnig oor die vertrek na Percy geloer het. “Dit is natuurlik moeilik. En gevaarlik, baie gevaarlik. Ons sal ten minste vyftig skoolreëls oortree, sou ek sê.”

“As jy dalk oor ’n maand gereed is om te sê wat jy bedoel, moet jy ons laat weet, hoor,” sê Ron geïrriteerd.

“Goed dan,” sê Hermien koud. “Wat ons moet doen, is om in Slibberin se geselskamer te kom en vir Malfoy ’n paar vrae te vra sonder dat hy agterkom dit is ons.”

“Maar dis onmoontlik,” sê Harry, en Ron lag.

“Nee, dit is nie,” sê Hermien, “Al wat ons moet hê, is ’n bietjie Polisouspaljas.”

“Wat’s dit?” sê Ron en Harry tesame.

“Snerp het ’n paar weke gelede daaroor gepraat –”

“Dink jy ons het niks beters om in die Towerdrankieklas te doen as om na Snerp te luister nie?” brom Ron.

“Dit verander jou in iemand anders. Dink net! Ons verander in drie Slibberins. Niemand sal weet dis ons nie. Malfoy sal ons waarskynlik alles vertel. Ek is seker hy loop en spog nou, op hierdie oomblik, oor alles daar in die Slibberin-geselskamer, ons moet hom net kan hoor.”

“Hierdie Polisousgoed klink ’n bietjie gevaarlik vir my,” sê Ron met ’n frons. “Wat as ons vir altyd soos drie Slibberins lyk?”

“Dit werk na ’n rukkie uit,” sê Hermien en waai haar hand ongeduldig, “dis net moeilik om die resep in die hande te kry. Snerp het gesê dis in ’n boek met die naam *Mees Kwade Towerdranke* en dit sal beslis in die Beperkte Afdeling van die biblioteek wees.”

Daar is net een manier om ’n boek in die Beperkte Afdeling uit te neem: jy moet ’n getekende briefie van toestemming by een van die onderwysers kry.

“Hulle gaan dadelik weet ons wil een van die towerdrankies maak,” sê Ron, “wat anders sal ons met die boek wil doen?”

“Ek dink,” sê Hermien, “as ons dit laat klink asof ons in die *teorie* belang stel, dan het ons dalk ’n kans . . .”

“Ag, g’n onderwyser gaan daarvoor val nie,” sê Ron. “Hulle sal regtig dof moet wees . . .”

CHAPTER TEN



THE ROGUE BLUDGER

Since the disastrous episode of the pixies, Professor Lockhart had not brought live creatures to class. Instead, he read passages from his books to them, and sometimes reenacted some of the more dramatic bits. He usually picked Harry to help him with these reconstructions; so far, Harry had been forced to play a simple Transylvanian villager whom Lockhart had cured of a Babbling Curse, a yeti with a head cold, and a vampire who had been unable to eat anything except lettuce since Lockhart had dealt with him.

Harry was hauled to the front of the class during their very next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, this time acting a werewolf. If he hadn't had a very good reason for keeping Lockhart in a good mood, he would have refused to do it.

"Nice loud howl, Harry — exactly — and then, if you'll believe it, I pounced — like this — *slammed* him to the floor — thus — with

one hand, I managed to hold him down — with my other, I put my wand to his throat — I then screwed up my remaining strength and performed the immensely complex Homorphus Charm — he let out a piteous moan — go on, Harry — higher than that — good — the fur vanished — the fangs shrank — and he turned back into a man. Simple, yet effective — and another village will remember me forever as the hero who delivered them from the monthly terror of werewolf attacks.”

The bell rang and Lockhart got to his feet.

“Homework — compose a poem about my defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf! Signed copies of *Magical Me* to the author of the best one!”

The class began to leave. Harry returned to the back of the room, where Ron and Hermione were waiting.

“Ready?” Harry muttered.

“Wait till everyone’s gone,” said Hermione nervously. “All right . . .”

She approached Lockhart’s desk, a piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, Harry and Ron right behind her.

“Er — Professor Lockhart?” Hermione stammered. “I wanted to — to get this book out of the library. Just for background reading.” She held out the piece of paper, her hand shaking slightly. “But the thing is, it’s in the Restricted Section of the library, so I need a teacher to sign for it — I’m sure it would help me understand what you say in *Gadding with Ghouls* about slow-acting venoms —”

“Ah, *Gadding with Ghouls*!” said Lockhart, taking the note from Hermione and smiling widely at her. “Possibly my very favorite

book. You enjoyed it?”

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione eagerly. “So clever, the way you trapped that last one with the tea-strainer —”

“Well, I’m sure no one will mind me giving the best student of the year a little extra help,” said Lockhart warmly, and he pulled out an enormous peacock quill. “Yes, nice, isn’t it?” he said, misreading the revolted look on Ron’s face. “I usually save it for book signings.”

He scrawled an enormous loopy signature on the note and handed it back to Hermione.

“So, Harry,” said Lockhart, while Hermione folded the note with fumbling fingers and slipped it into her bag. “Tomorrow’s the first Quidditch match of the season, I believe? Gryffindor against Slytherin, is it not? I hear you’re a useful player. I was a Seeker, too. I was asked to try for the National Squad, but preferred to dedicate my life to the eradication of the Dark Forces. Still, if ever you feel the need for a little private training, don’t hesitate to ask. Always happy to pass on my expertise to less able players. . . .”

Harry made an indistinct noise in his throat and then hurried off after Ron and Hermione.

“I don’t believe it,” he said as the three of them examined the signature on the note. “He didn’t even *look* at the book we wanted.”

“That’s because he’s a brainless *git*,” said Ron. “But who cares, we’ve got what we needed —”

“He is *not* a brainless git,” said Hermione shrilly as they half ran toward the library.

“Just because he said you were the best student of the year —”

They dropped their voices as they entered the muffled stillness of

the library. Madam Pince, the librarian, was a thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture.

“*Moste Potente Potions?*” she repeated suspiciously, trying to take the note from Hermione; but Hermione wouldn’t let go.

“I was wondering if I could keep it,” she said breathlessly.

“Oh, come on,” said Ron, wrenching it from her grasp and thrusting it at Madam Pince. “We’ll get you another autograph. Lockhart’ll sign anything if it stands still long enough.”

Madam Pince held the note up to the light, as though determined to detect a forgery, but it passed the test. She stalked away between the lofty shelves and returned several minutes later carrying a large and moldy-looking book. Hermione put it carefully into her bag and they left, trying not to walk too quickly or look too guilty.

Five minutes later, they were barricaded in Moaning Myrtle’s out-of-order bathroom once again. Hermione had overridden Ron’s objections by pointing out that it was the last place anyone in their right minds would go, so they were guaranteed some privacy. Moaning Myrtle was crying noisily in her stall, but they were ignoring her, and she them.

Hermione opened *Moste Potente Potions* carefully, and the three of them bent over the damp-spotted pages. It was clear from a glance why it belonged in the Restricted Section. Some of the potions had effects almost too gruesome to think about, and there were some very unpleasant illustrations, which included a man who seemed to have been turned inside out and a witch sprouting several extra pairs of arms out of her head.

“Here it is,” said Hermione excitedly as she found the page headed

The Polyjuice Potion. It was decorated with drawings of people halfway through transforming into other people. Harry sincerely hoped the artist had imagined the looks of intense pain on their faces.

“This is the most complicated potion I’ve ever seen,” said Hermione as they scanned the recipe. “Lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass,” she murmured, running her finger down the list of ingredients. “Well, they’re easy enough, they’re in the student store-cupboard, we can help ourselves. . . . Oooh, look, powdered horn of a bicorn — don’t know where we’re going to get that — shredded skin of a boomslang — that’ll be tricky, too — and of course a bit of whoever we want to change into.”

“Excuse me?” said Ron sharply. “What d’you mean, a bit of whoever we’re changing into? I’m drinking *nothing* with Crabbe’s toenails in it —”

Hermione continued as though she hadn’t heard him.

“We don’t have to worry about that yet, though, because we add those bits last. . . .”

Ron turned, speechless, to Harry, who had another worry.

“D’you realize how much we’re going to have to steal, Hermione? Shredded skin of a boomslang, that’s definitely not in the students’ cupboard. What’re we going to do, break into Snape’s private stores? I don’t know if this is a good idea. . . .”

Hermione shut the book with a snap.

“Well, if you two are going to chicken out, fine,” she said. There were bright pink patches on her cheeks and her eyes were brighter than usual. “I don’t want to break rules, you know. *I* think threatening Muggle-borns is far worse than brewing up a difficult potion. But if

you don't want to find out if it's Malfoy, I'll go straight to Madam Pince now and hand the book back in —”

“I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be persuading us to break rules,” said Ron. “All right, we'll do it. But not toenails, okay?”

“How long will it take to make, anyway?” said Harry as Hermione, looking happier, opened the book again.

“Well, since the fluxweed has got to be picked at the full moon and the lacewings have got to be stewed for twenty-one days . . . I'd say it'd be ready in about a month, if we can get all the ingredients.”

“A month?” said Ron. “Malfoy could have attacked half the Muggle-borns in the school by then!” But Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously again, and he added swiftly, “But it's the best plan we've got, so full steam ahead, I say.”

However, while Hermione was checking that the coast was clear for them to leave the bathroom, Ron muttered to Harry, “It'll be a lot less hassle if you can just knock Malfoy off his broom tomorrow.”

Harry woke early on Saturday morning and lay for a while thinking about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost, but also at the idea of facing a team mounted on the fastest racing brooms gold could buy. He had never wanted to beat Slytherin so badly. After half an hour of lying there with his insides churning, he got up, dressed, and went down to breakfast early, where he found the rest of the Gryffindor team huddled at the long, empty table, all looking uptight and not speaking much.

As eleven o'clock approached, the whole school started to make its way down to the Quidditch stadium. It was a muggy sort of day with a hint of thunder in the air. Ron and Hermione came hurrying over to wish Harry good luck as he entered the locker rooms. The team pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood's usual pre-match pep talk.

"Slytherin has better brooms than us," he began. "No point denying it. But we've got better *people* on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weathers —" ("Too true," muttered George Weasley. "I haven't been properly dry since August") "— and we're going to make them rue the day they let that little bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

Chest heaving with emotion, Wood turned to Harry.

"It'll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a rich father. Get to that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we've got to win today, we've got to."

"So no pressure, Harry," said Fred, winking at him.

As they walked out onto the pitch, a roar of noise greeted them; mainly cheers, because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were anxious to see Slytherin beaten, but the Slytherins in the crowd made their boos and hisses heard, too. Madam Hooch, the Quidditch teacher, asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was necessary.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch. "Three . . . two . . . one . . ."

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upward, the fourteen players rose toward the leaden sky. Harry flew higher than any of

them, squinting around for the Snitch.

“All right there, Scarhead?” yelled Malfoy, shooting underneath him as though to show off the speed of his broom.

Harry had no time to reply. At that very moment, a heavy black Bludger came pelting toward him; he avoided it so narrowly that he felt it ruffle his hair as it passed.

“Close one, Harry!” said George, streaking past him with his club in his hand, ready to knock the Bludger back toward a Slytherin. Harry saw George give the Bludger a powerful whack in the direction of Adrian Pucey, but the Bludger changed direction in midair and shot straight for Harry again.

Harry dropped quickly to avoid it, and George managed to hit it hard toward Malfoy. Once again, the Bludger swerved like a boomerang and shot at Harry’s head.

Harry put on a burst of speed and zoomed toward the other end of the pitch. He could hear the Bludger whistling along behind him. What was going on? Bludgers never concentrated on one player like this; it was their job to try and unseat as many people as possible. . . .

Fred Weasley was waiting for the Bludger at the other end. Harry ducked as Fred swung at the Bludger with all his might; the Bludger was knocked off course.

“Gotcha!” Fred yelled happily, but he was wrong; as though it was magnetically attracted to Harry, the Bludger pelted after him once more and Harry was forced to fly off at full speed.

It had started to rain; Harry felt heavy drops fall onto his face, splattering onto his glasses. He didn’t have a clue what was going on in the rest of the game until he heard Lee Jordan, who was

commentating, say, “Slytherin lead, sixty points to zero —”

The Slytherins’ superior brooms were clearly doing their jobs, and meanwhile the mad Bludger was doing all it could to knock Harry out of the air. Fred and George were now flying so close to him on either side that Harry could see nothing at all except their flailing arms and had no chance to look for the Snitch, let alone catch it.

“Someone’s — tampered — with — this — Bludger —” Fred grunted, swinging his bat with all his might at it as it launched a new attack on Harry.

“We need time out,” said George, trying to signal to Wood and stop the Bludger breaking Harry’s nose at the same time.

Wood had obviously got the message. Madam Hooch’s whistle rang out and Harry, Fred, and George dived for the ground, still trying to avoid the mad Bludger.

“What’s going on?” said Wood as the Gryffindor team huddled together, while Slytherins in the crowd jeered. “We’re being flattened. Fred, George, where were you when that Bludger stopped Angelina scoring?”

“We were twenty feet above her, stopping the other Bludger from murdering Harry, Oliver,” said George angrily. “Someone’s fixed it — it won’t leave Harry alone. It hasn’t gone for anyone else all game. The Slytherins must have done something to it.”

“But the Bludgers have been locked in Madam Hooch’s office since our last practice, and there was nothing wrong with them then. . . .” said Wood, anxiously.

Madam Hooch was walking toward them. Over her shoulder, Harry could see the Slytherin team jeering and pointing in his

direction.

“Listen,” said Harry as she came nearer and nearer, “with you two flying around me all the time the only way I’m going to catch the Snitch is if it flies up my sleeve. Go back to the rest of the team and let me deal with the rogue one.”

“Don’t be thick,” said Fred. “It’ll take your head off.”

Wood was looking from Harry to the Weasleys.

“Oliver, this is insane,” said Alicia Spinnet angrily. “You can’t let Harry deal with that thing on his own. Let’s ask for an inquiry —”

“If we stop now, we’ll have to forfeit the match!” said Harry. “And we’re not losing to Slytherin just because of a crazy Bludger! Come on, Oliver, tell them to leave me alone!”

“This is all your fault,” George said angrily to Wood. “‘Get the Snitch or die trying,’ what a stupid thing to tell him —”

Madam Hooch had joined them.

“Ready to resume play?” she asked Wood.

Wood looked at the determined look on Harry’s face.

“All right,” he said. “Fred, George, you heard Harry — leave him alone and let him deal with the Bludger on his own.”

The rain was falling more heavily now. On Madam Hooch’s whistle, Harry kicked hard into the air and heard the telltale whoosh of the Bludger behind him. Higher and higher Harry climbed; he looped and swooped, spiraled, zigzagged, and rolled. Slightly dizzy, he nevertheless kept his eyes wide open, rain was speckling his glasses and ran up his nostrils as he hung upside down, avoiding another fierce dive from the Bludger. He could hear laughter from the crowd; he knew he must look very stupid, but the rogue Bludger was

heavy and couldn't change direction as quickly as Harry could; he began a kind of roller-coaster ride around the edges of the stadium, squinting through the silver sheets of rain to the Gryffindor goalposts, where Adrian Pucey was trying to get past Wood —

A whistling in Harry's ear told him the Bludger had just missed him again; he turned right over and sped in the opposite direction.

"Training for the ballet, Potter?" yelled Malfoy as Harry was forced to do a stupid kind of twirl in midair to dodge the Bludger, and he fled, the Bludger trailing a few feet behind him; and then, glaring back at Malfoy in hatred, he saw it — *the Golden Snitch*. It was hovering inches above Malfoy's left ear — and Malfoy, busy laughing at Harry, hadn't seen it.

For an agonizing moment, Harry hung in midair, not daring to speed toward Malfoy in case he looked up and saw the Snitch.

WHAM.

He had stayed still a second too long. The Bludger had hit him at last, smashed into his elbow, and Harry felt his arm break. Dimly, dazed by the searing pain in his arm, he slid sideways on his rain-drenched broom, one knee still crooked over it, his right arm dangling useless at his side — the Bludger came pelting back for a second attack, this time aiming at his face — Harry swerved out of the way, one idea firmly lodged in his numb brain: *get to Malfoy*.

Through a haze of rain and pain he dived for the shimmering, sneering face below him and saw its eyes widen with fear: Malfoy thought Harry was attacking him.

"What the —" he gasped, careening out of Harry's way.

Harry took his remaining hand off his broom and made a wild

snatch; he felt his fingers close on the cold Snitch but was now only gripping the broom with his legs, and there was a yell from the crowd below as he headed straight for the ground, trying hard not to pass out.

With a splattering thud he hit the mud and rolled off his broom. His arm was hanging at a very strange angle; riddled with pain, he heard, as though from a distance, a good deal of whistling and shouting. He focused on the Snitch clutched in his good hand.

“Aha,” he said vaguely. “We’ve won.”

And he fainted.

He came around, rain falling on his face, still lying on the field, with someone leaning over him. He saw a glitter of teeth.

“Oh, no, not you,” he moaned.

“Doesn’t know what he’s saying,” said Lockhart loudly to the anxious crowd of Gryffindors pressing around them. “Not to worry, Harry. I’m about to fix your arm.”

“No!” said Harry. “I’ll keep it like this, thanks. . . .”

He tried to sit up, but the pain was terrible. He heard a familiar clicking noise nearby.

“I don’t want a photo of this, Colin,” he said loudly.

“Lie back, Harry,” said Lockhart soothingly. “It’s a simple charm I’ve used countless times —”

“Why can’t I just go to the hospital wing?” said Harry through clenched teeth.

“He should really, Professor,” said a muddy Wood, who couldn’t help grinning even though his Seeker was injured. “Great capture, Harry, really spectacular, your best yet, I’d say —”

Through the thicket of legs around him, Harry spotted Fred and George Weasley, wrestling the rogue Bludger into a box. It was still putting up a terrific fight.

“Stand back,” said Lockhart, who was rolling up his jade-green sleeves.

“No — don’t —” said Harry weakly, but Lockhart was twirling his wand and a second later had directed it straight at Harry’s arm.

A strange and unpleasant sensation started at Harry’s shoulder and spread all the way down to his fingertips. It felt as though his arm was being deflated. He didn’t dare look at what was happening. He had shut his eyes, his face turned away from his arm, but his worst fears were realized as the people above him gasped and Colin Creevey began clicking away madly. His arm didn’t hurt anymore — nor did it feel remotely like an arm.

“Ah,” said Lockhart. “Yes. Well, that can sometimes happen. But the point is, the bones are no longer broken. That’s the thing to bear in mind. So, Harry, just toddle up to the hospital wing — ah, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, would you escort him? — and Madam Pomfrey will be able to — er — tidy you up a bit.”

As Harry got to his feet, he felt strangely lopsided. Taking a deep breath he looked down at his right side. What he saw nearly made him pass out again.

Poking out of the end of his robes was what looked like a thick, flesh-colored rubber glove. He tried to move his fingers. Nothing happened.

Lockhart hadn’t mended Harry’s bones. He had removed them.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't at all pleased.

"You should have come straight to me!" she raged, holding up the sad, limp remainder of what, half an hour before, had been a working arm. "I can mend bones in a second — but growing them back —"

"You will be able to, won't you?" said Harry desperately.

"I'll be able to, certainly, but it will be painful," said Madam Pomfrey grimly, throwing Harry a pair of pajamas. "You'll have to stay the night. . . ."

Hermione waited outside the curtain drawn around Harry's bed while Ron helped him into his pajamas. It took a while to stuff the rubbery, boneless arm into a sleeve.

"How can you stick up for Lockhart now, Hermione, eh?" Ron called through the curtain as he pulled Harry's limp fingers through the cuff. "If Harry had wanted deboning he would have asked."

"Anyone can make a mistake," said Hermione. "And it doesn't hurt anymore, does it, Harry?"

"No," said Harry, getting into bed. "But it doesn't do anything else either."

As he swung himself onto the bed, his arm flapped pointlessly.

Hermione and Madam Pomfrey came around the curtain. Madam Pomfrey was holding a large bottle of something labeled *Skele-Gro*.

"You're in for a rough night," she said, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. "Regrowing bones is a nasty business."

So was taking the Skele-Gro. It burned Harry's mouth and throat as it went down, making him cough and splutter. Still tut-tutting about dangerous sports and inept teachers, Madam Pomfrey retreated,

leaving Ron and Hermione to help Harry gulp down some water.

“We won, though,” said Ron, a grin breaking across his face. “That was some catch you made. Malfoy’s face . . . he looked ready to kill. . . .”

“I want to know how he fixed that Bludger,” said Hermione darkly.

“We can add that to the list of questions we’ll ask him when we’ve taken the Polyjuice Potion,” said Harry, sinking back onto his pillows. “I hope it tastes better than this stuff. . . .”

“If it’s got bits of Slytherins in it? You’ve got to be joking,” said Ron.

The door of the hospital wing burst open at that moment. Filthy and soaking wet, the rest of the Gryffindor team had arrived to see Harry.

“Unbelievable flying, Harry,” said George. “I’ve just seen Marcus Flint yelling at Malfoy. Something about having the Snitch on top of his head and not noticing. Malfoy didn’t seem too happy.”

They had brought cakes, sweets, and bottles of pumpkin juice; they gathered around Harry’s bed and were just getting started on what promised to be a good party when Madam Pomfrey came storming over, shouting, “This boy needs rest, he’s got thirty-three bones to regrow! Out! OUT!”

And Harry was left alone, with nothing to distract him from the stabbing pains in his limp arm.

Hours and hours later, Harry woke quite suddenly in the pitch blackness and gave a small yelp of pain: His arm now felt full of large splinters. For a second, he thought that was what had woken him. Then, with a thrill of horror, he realized that someone was

sponging his forehead in the dark.

“Get off!” he said loudly, and then, “*Dobby!*”

The house-elf’s goggling tennis ball eyes were peering at Harry through the darkness. A single tear was running down his long, pointed nose.

“Harry Potter came back to school,” he whispered miserably. “Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter. Ah sir, why didn’t you heed Dobby? Why didn’t Harry Potter go back home when he missed the train?”

Harry heaved himself up on his pillows and pushed Dobby’s sponge away.

“What’re you doing here?” he said. “And how did you know I missed the train?”

Dobby’s lip trembled and Harry was seized by a sudden suspicion.

“It was *you!*” he said slowly. “*You* stopped the barrier from letting us through!”

“Indeed yes, sir,” said Dobby, nodding his head vigorously, ears flapping. “Dobby hid and watched for Harry Potter and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterward” — he showed Harry ten long, bandaged fingers — “but Dobby didn’t care, sir, for he thought Harry Potter was safe, and *never* did Dobby dream that Harry Potter would get to school another way!”

He was rocking backward and forward, shaking his ugly head.

“Dobby was so shocked when he heard Harry Potter was back at Hogwarts, he let his master’s dinner burn! Such a flogging Dobby never had, sir. . . .”

Harry slumped back onto his pillows.

“You nearly got Ron and me expelled,” he said fiercely. “You’d better get lost before my bones come back, Dobby, or I might strangle you.”

Dobby smiled weakly.

“Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home.”

He blew his nose on a corner of the filthy pillowcase he wore, looking so pathetic that Harry felt his anger ebb away in spite of himself.

“Why d’you wear that thing, Dobby?” he asked curiously.

“This, sir?” said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase. “’Tis a mark of the house-elf’s enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever.”

Dobby mopped his bulging eyes and said suddenly, “Harry Potter *must* go home! Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make —”

“*Your* Bludger?” said Harry, anger rising once more. “What d’you mean, *your* Bludger? *You* made that Bludger try and kill me?”

“Not kill you, sir, never kill you!” said Dobby, shocked. “Dobby wants to save Harry Potter’s life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here, sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!”

“Oh, is that all?” said Harry angrily. “I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me *why* you wanted me sent home in pieces?”

“Ah, if Harry Potter only knew!” Dobby groaned, more tears

dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. “If he knew what he means to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir,” he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. “But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord’s power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the dark days would never end, sir. . . . And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more —”

Dobby froze, horrorstruck, then grabbed Harry’s water jug from his bedside table and cracked it over his own head, toppling out of sight. A second later, he crawled back onto the bed, cross-eyed, muttering, “Bad Dobby, very bad Dobby . . .”

“So there *is* a Chamber of Secrets?” Harry whispered. “And — did you say it’s been opened *before*? *Tell* me, Dobby!”

He seized the elf’s bony wrist as Dobby’s hand inched toward the water jug. “But I’m not Muggle-born — how can I be in danger from the Chamber?”

“Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby,” stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. “Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Potter must not be here when they happen — go home, Harry Potter, go home. Harry Potter must not meddle in this, sir, ’tis

too dangerous —”

“Who is it, Dobby?” Harry said, keeping a firm hold on Dobby’s wrist to stop him from hitting himself with the water jug again. “Who’s opened it? Who opened it last time?”

“Dobby can’t, sir, Dobby can’t, Dobby mustn’t tell!” squealed the elf. “Go home, Harry Potter, go home!”

“I’m not going anywhere!” said Harry fiercely. “One of my best friends is Muggle-born; she’ll be first in line if the Chamber really has been opened —”

“Harry Potter risks his own life for his friends!” moaned Dobby in a kind of miserable ecstasy. “So noble! So valiant! But he must save himself, he must, Harry Potter must not —”

Dobby suddenly froze, his bat ears quivering. Harry heard it, too. There were footsteps coming down the passageway outside.

“Dobby must go!” breathed the elf, terrified. There was a loud crack, and Harry’s fist was suddenly clenched on thin air. He slumped back into bed, his eyes on the dark doorway to the hospital wing as the footsteps drew nearer.

Next moment, Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carrying one end of what looked like a statue. Professor McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying its feet. Together, they heaved it onto a bed.

“Get Madam Pomfrey,” whispered Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry’s bed out of sight. Harry lay quite still, pretending to be asleep. He heard urgent voices, and then Professor McGonagall swept back into view, closely followed

by Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her nightdress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

“What happened?” Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue on the bed.

“Another attack,” said Dumbledore. “Minerva found him on the stairs.”

“There was a bunch of grapes next to him,” said Professor McGonagall. “We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Potter.”

Harry’s stomach gave a horrible lurch. Slowly and carefully, he raised himself a few inches so he could look at the statue on the bed. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face.

It was Colin Creevey. His eyes were wide and his hands were stuck up in front of him, holding his camera.

“Petrified?” whispered Madam Pomfrey.

“Yes,” said Professor McGonagall. “But I shudder to think . . . If Albus hadn’t been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate — who knows what might have —”

The three of them stared down at Colin. Then Dumbledore leaned forward and wrenched the camera out of Colin’s rigid grip.

“You don’t think he managed to get a picture of his attacker?” said Professor McGonagall eagerly.

Dumbledore didn’t answer. He opened the back of the camera.

“Good gracious!” said Madam Pomfrey.

A jet of steam had hissed out of the camera. Harry, three beds away, caught the acrid smell of burnt plastic.

“Melted,” said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. “All melted . . .”

“What does this *mean*, Albus?” Professor McGonagall asked urgently.

“It means,” said Dumbledore, “that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again.”

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. Professor McGonagall stared at Dumbledore.

“But, Albus . . . surely . . . *who*?”

“The question is not *who*,” said Dumbledore, his eyes on Colin. “The question is, *how*. . . .”

And from what Harry could see of Professor McGonagall’s shadowy face, she didn’t understand this any better than he did.

Die Moorddadige Moker

Sedert die rampspoedige episode met die Korniese Kabouters het professor Lockhart nie weer lewende gediertes klas toe gebring nie. Pleks daarvan lees hy lang stukke uit sy boeke voor en soms dramatiseer hy die meer opwindende dele. Hy kies gewoonlik vir Harry om hom met hierdie opvoerings te help; tot dusver was Harry 'n dommerige Transilvaniese dorpenaar vir wie Lockhart van 'n Babbelvloek genees het, 'n jeti met verkoue en 'n vampier wat net slaai eet nadat Lockhart korte mette van hom gemaak het.

Net die volgende keer toe hulle Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste het, word Harry nogmaals ingespan, hierdie keer as 'n weerwolf. As hy nie so graag vir Lockhart in 'n goeie bui wou hou nie, het hy sowaar botweg geweier.

“n Lekker harde tjank, Harry – net so – en toe, julle sal dit nie glo nie, toe spring ek – net so – slaan hom teen die grond – so – hou hom net daar met een hand – druk my towerstaf teen sy keel met die ander hand – skraap my laaste bietjie kragte bymekaar en doen hierdie ongelooflik ingewikkelde Homorphus Towerspreuk – hy uiter 'n jammerlike kreet – toe nou, Harry – hoër as dit – dis mooi – die pels verdwyn – die slagande krimp weg – en hy verander terug in 'n mens. Eenvoudig, dog effektief – en nog 'n dorpie onthou my vir ewig as die held wat hulle bevry het van die maandelikse terreur van weerwolfaanvalle.”

Die klok lui en Lockhart kom orent.

“Huiswerk: skryf 'n gedig oor my oorwinning oor die Wagga Wagga weerwolf! Getekende eksemplare van Ek, die Betowerende aan die skrywer van die beste een!”

Die klas begin leegloop. Harry gaan terug na die agterkant van die vertrek waar Ron en Hermien reeds wag.

“Gereed?” mompel Harry.

“Wag tot almal uit is,” sê Hermien senuagtig. “Reg . . .”

Sy stap na Lockhart se lessenaar, 'n stukkie papier styf in haar hand en met Harry en Ron kort op haar hakke.

“H'm – professor Lochhart?” stamel Hermien. “Ek wil – hierdie boek

by die biblioteek uitneem. Vir agtergrondleesstof." Met 'n hand wat liggies bewe hou sy die stuk papier na hom toe uit. "Maar die ding is, dis in die Beperkte Afdeling, dus moet 'n onderwyser vir my teken – ek is seker dit sal my help om beter te verstaan wat u alles in *Dans met die Doodsbode* sê oor gifstowwe met 'n stadige werking . . ."

"Aha, *Dans met die Doodsbode!*" sê Lockhart en neem die briefie by Hermien en glimlag breed vir haar. "Werklik my gunstelingboek! Het jy dit geniet?"

"O ja," sê Hermien gretig. "Baie slim, hoe u daardie laaste een met 'n teesiffie vasgetrek het . . ."

"Wel, ek is seker niemand sal omgee as ek die beste student van die jaar 'n bietjie ekstra hulp gee nie," sê Lockhart gul en haal 'n enorme pouveerpen uit. "Ja, dis mooi, nè?" sê hy trots. Dis duidelik dat hy die uitdrukking van afsku op Ron se gesig heeltemal verkeerd gelees het. "Gewoonlik hou ek dit vir boektekensessies."

Hy maak 'n enorme krullerige handtekening op die briefie en gee dit terug aan Hermien.

"So, Harry," sê Lockhart, terwyl Hermien die briefie met 'n onhandige gevroetel opvou en in haar tas steek, "môre is die eerste Kwiddiekwedstryd van die seisoen, hoor ek. Griffindor teen Slibberin, nie waar nie? Ek hoor jy is 'n handige klein spelertjie. Ek was ook 'n Soeker op my dag. Ek is genooi vir die proewe vir die Nasionale Span, maar het verkies om my lewe aan die uitwissing van Donker Magte te wy. As jy egter ooit voel dat jy 'n bietjie privaat onderrig nodig het, moet jy nie skroom om te vra nie. Ek is altyd bereid om my kennis met minder bekwame spelers te deel . . ."

Harry maak 'n kreungeluid diep agter in sy keel en haas hom agter Ron en Hermien aan.

"Ek glo dit nie," sê hy toe die drie van hulle die handtekening op die brief bekyk. "Hy't nie eens *gekyk* watter boek ons wil hê nie."

"Dis omdat hy 'n breinlose bobbejaan is," sê Ron. "Maar wat maak dit tog saak, ons het wat ons nodig het."

"Hy is *nie* 'n breinlose bobbejaan nie," sê Hermien skril terwyl hulle biblioteek toe draf.

"Net omdat hy gesê het jy's die beste student van die jaar . . ."

Hul stemme sak toe hulle die gedempte atmosfeer van die biblioteek binnestap.

Madame Pince, die bibliotekaresse, is 'n maer, kortgebakerde vrou wat soos 'n uitgehongerde aasvoël lyk.

"*Mees Kwade Towerdranke?*" herhaal sy agterdogtig en probeer die briefie by Hermien vat, maar Hermien wil dit nie los nie.

"Ek het gewonder of ek dit kan hou," sê sy ademloos.

"Ag, twak," sê Ron en gryp dit uit haar hande en hou dit uit na Mad-

ame Pince. "Ons sal vir jou 'n ander handtekening kry. Lockhart sal enigiets teken, dit moet net lank genoeg stilstaan."

Madame Pince hou die briefie teen die lug, asof sy dink dis dalk vervals, maar vind skynbaar nie fout nie. Sy verdwyn tussen die hoë rakke en kom 'n rukkie later terug met 'n groot boek wat bra muwwerig lyk. Hermien sit dit versigtig in haar tas en toe hulle uitstap, probeer hulle om nie te vinnig te loop, of te skuldig te lyk nie.

Vyf minute later sit hulle weer eens toegemaak in Katryn Kermkous se badkamer. Hermien het Ron se besware ter syde gestel deur te sê dat dit die allerlaaste plek is waarheen enigeen wat by sy volle verstand is, sal gaan, en dat niemand hulle dus daar sal kom soek nie. Katryn Kermkous is besig om lawaaierig in haar hokkie te huil, maar hulle steur hulle nie aan haar nie, en sy los hulle ook uit.

Hermien maak *Mees Kwade Towerdranke* versigtig oop en die driestuks buig oor die gevlekte blaaie. Dit is met die eerste oogopslag duidelik hoe-kom dit in die Beperkte Afdeling is. Sommige van die towerdrankies het die aakligste gevolge en daar is 'n paar grusame tekeninge: 'n man wat lyk of hy binneste buite omgedop is en 'n heks uit wie se kop 'n hele klomp ekstra pare arms groei.

"Hier is dit," sê Hermien opgewonde toe sy die bladsy kry waarop *Polisouspaljas* staan. Dit is versier met tekeninge van mense wat halfpad in ander mense getransformeer is. Harry hoop van harte dat die intense pyn op die mense se gesigte net die kunstenaar se verbeelding is.

"Dit is die ingewikkelste towerdrankie wat ek nog gesien het," sê Hermien terwyl hulle die resep vlugtig lees. "Netvlerkige vlieë, bloedsuiers, smeltkruid en knoopgras," mompel sy en trek 'n vinger teen die lys bestanddele af. "Wel, dis maklik genoeg, dis in die studente se voorraadkas, ons kan onself help. Oee, kyk, verpoeierde horing van 'n Tweehoring – weet nie waar ons dit gaan kry nie . . . Gesnipperde Boomslangvel – net so moeilik – en natuurlik 'n stukkjie van die een wat jy wil word."

"Verskoon my?" sê Ron skerp. "Wat bedoel jy met 'n stukkjie van wie jy ook al wil word? Ek drink *niks* met Krabbe se toonnaels in nie . . ."

Hermien gaan voort asof sy hom glad nie gehoor het nie.

"Ons hoef ons nie nou al daaroor te bekommer nie, want daardie stukkie kom heel laaste by . . ."

Ron is sprakeloos toe hy na Harry draai, maar daar is iets anders wat Harry bekommer.

"Besef jy wat ons alles sal moet steel, Hermien? Gesnipperde Boomslangvel, dis beslis nie in die studente se kas nie. Wat gaan ons doen, by een van Snerp se kaste inbreek? Ek weet regtig nie of dit so 'n goeie idee is nie . . ."

Hermien klap die boek hard toe.

“As julle twee bang is, goed dan,” sê sy. Daar is twee helderpienk kolle op haar wange en haar oë is blinker as gewoonlik. “Ek wil nie die reëls oortree nie. Ek dink dis baie erger om mense met Moggelouers te staan en dreig as om ’n ingewikkelde towerdrankie te wil maak. Maar as julle nie wil uitvind of dit Malfoy is nie, dan gaan ek nou dadelik na Madame Pince en gee die boek terug . . .”

“Ek het nooit kon dink ek sal die dag beleef dat jy vir ons probeer oortreed om reëls te oortree nie,” sê Ron. “Goed, goed, ons sal dit doen. Maar net nie toonnaels nie, oukei?”

“Hoe lank gaan dit vat om dit te maak?” sê Harry toe Hermien, wat nou baie meer tevrede lyk, weer die boek oopslaan.

“Wel, die smeltkruid moet gepluk word wanneer dit volmaan is en die netvlerkige vlieë moet een-en-twintig dae lank stowe . . . ek sou sê dit sal binne ’n maand reg wees, dis nou as ons al die bestanddele kan kry.”

“’n Maand?” sê Ron. “Teen daardie tyd het Malfoy al goed die helfte van die mense met Moggelouers aangeval!” Toe Hermien se oë weer dreigend vernou, voeg hy vinnig by, “Maar dis die beste plan wat ons het, so volstoom vorentoe, sê ek.”

Maar terwyl Hermien kyk of alles veilig is vir hulle om te loop, brom Ron vir Harry, “Dit sal baie makliker wees as jy Malfoy sommer net môre van sy besem afstamp.”

Vroeg daardie Saterdagoggend is Harry wakker en lê hy en dink aan die komende Kwiddiekwedstryd. Hy is senuweeagtig, hoofsaaklik oor wat Wood gaan sê as Griffindor moet verloor, maar ook by die gedagte aan ’n span teenstanders op die vinnigste resiesbesems wat goud kan koop. Hy wou nog nooit so graag vir Slibberin klop nie. Na ’n halfuur van lê met binnegoed wat draai, staan hy op, trek aan en stap af om vroeg ontbyt te gaan eet. Die res van die Griffindor-span sit reeds styf langs mekaar om die lang, leë tafel; almal lyk gespanne en niemand sê veel nie.

Skuins voor elf maak die hele skool reg om na die Kwiddiekveld te gaan. Dit is ’n bedompige soort dag en daar is ’n tikkie onweer in die lug. Ron en Hermien kom haastig nader om vir Harry die beste toe te wens voor hy by die kledkamers instap. Die span trek hul rooi Griffindorklere aan en gaan sit om na Wood se gewone spanpraatjie te luister.

“Slibberin het beter besems as ons,” begin hy, “help nie om dit te ontdek nie. Maar ons het beter mense op ons besems. Ons het harder as hulle geoefen, ons het in alle soorte weer gevlieg –” (“Baie waar,” mompel George Weasley. “Ek was in Augustus laas behoorlik droog”), “– en ons gaan seker maak dat hulle die dag berou toe daardie stuk slym van ’n Malfoy sy plek in hul span gekoop het.”

Met ’n borskas wat op en neer dein van emosie, draai Wood na Harry. “Dis jou taak, Harry, om vir hulle te wys dat ’n Soeker iets meer as ’n

ryk pa moet hê. Kry daardie Snip voor Malfoy, of sterf in die proses, Harry, want vandag moet ons wen, ons moet net.”

“Dus, geen druk nie, Harry,” sê Fred met ’n knip-oog.

Toe hulle op die veld stap, begroet ’n gebrul van klank hulle; hoofsaaklik toejuiging, want Raweklou en Hoesenproes wil ook hê Slibberin moet verloor, maar die Slibberins in die skare se geboe en gesis is ook hoorbaar. Madame Hooch, die Kwiddiekonderwyser, vra vir Flint en Wood om hand te skud, wat hulle doen, terwyl hulle mekaar aangluur en mekaar se hande baie harder as wat nodig is, druk.

“Luister vir die fluitjie,” sê Madame Hooch, “drie . . . twee . . . een . . .”

Met ’n gejuig uit die skare om hulle die lug in aan te spoor, skiet die veertien spelers die grys hemel in. Harry vlieg hoër as al die ander en soek deur skrefiesoë na die Snip.

“Hoe’s dinge, Roofkop?” gil Malfoy en skiet onder hom verby asof hy wil wys hoe vinnig sy besem is.

Harry het nie tyd om te antwoord nie. Op daardie oomblik pyl ’n groot swart Moker op hom af; hy vermy dit naelskraap en voel hoe dit sy hare in die verbygaan deurmekaar warrel.

“So hittete, Harry!” sê George en skiet verby hom met sy kolf in sy hand, gereed om die Moker na ’n Slibberin te slaan. Harry sien hoe George die Moker met ’n allemintige hou in Adriaan Pienaar se rigting stuur, maar hoog in die lug verander die Moker van koers en pyl weer eens reg op Harry af.

Harry sak vinnig om dit te vermy en George slaag daarin om dit hard na Malfoy te slaan. Die Moker swenk weer en pyl soos ’n boemerang op Harry se kop af.

Harry gee vet en skiet na die oorkant van die veld. Hy kan die Moker agter hom hoor fluit. Wat gaan aan? Mokers konsentreer nooit net op een persoon nie, dis hul werk om soveel mense moontlik van hul besems af te slaan . . .

Aan die ander kant van die veld wag Fred Weasley die Moker in. Harry koes toe Fred met mening na die Moker swaai en dit van koers dwing.

“Het hom!” gil Fred in sy noppies, maar sy blydschap is van korte duur. Asof dit magneties na Harry aangetrek word, mik die Moker weer eens na Harry en hy word genoodsaak om teen volle spoed weg te vlieg.

Dit het begin reën; Harry voel hoe harde druppels op sy gesig val en teen sy brilglase spat. Hy het nie ’n idee wat met die res van die wedstryd aangaan nie, tot hy hoor hoe Lee Jordaan, wat kommentaar lewer, sê, “Slibberin loop voor met sestig doele teen nul.”

Die Slibberins se beter besems laat hulle beslis geld en die mal Moker doen sy bes om vir Harry uit die lug te slaan. Fred en George vlieg nou aan weerskante van Harry en so na aan hom dat hy niks kan sien nie,

behalwe hul malende arms. Hy staan nie 'n kans om die Snip te sien nie, wat nog te sê, vang.

"Iemand – het – met – hierdie – Moker – gepeuter –" grom Fred en swaai sy kolf met alle mag toe dit weer eens 'n aanval op Harry loods.

"Ons het 'n blaaskans nodig," sê George en probeer 'n teken vir Wood gee en terselfdertyd keer dat die Moker Harry se neus breek.

Dis duidelik dat Wood die bloedskap gekry het. Madame Hooch se fluitjie klink op en Harry, Fred en George duik grond toe terwyl hulle steeds sukkel om die mal Moker te vermy.

"Wat gaan aan?" sê Wood toe die Griffindor-span saamdrom terwyl die Slibberins in die skare hulle uitjou. "Hulle loop ons plat. Fred, George, waar was julle toe daardie Moker veroorsaak het dat Angelina nie 'n doel kon kry nie?"

"Ons was ses meter bo haar aan die sukkel om te keer dat die ander Moker vir Harry vermorsel, Oliver," sê George vererg. "Iemand het dit getoor – dit wil nie vir Harry uitlos nie, dit het nog die hele tyd niemand anders probeer aanval nie. Die Slibberins moet iets daaraan gedoen het."

"Maar die Mokers was die hele tyd toegesluit in Madame Hooch se kantoor, al van ons laaste oefening af, en toe was daar niks met hulle verkeerd nie . . ." sê Wood bekommerd.

Madame Hooch kom aangestap. Oor haar skouer sien Harry hoe die Slibberin-span koggel en skree en na hom wys.

"Luister," sê Harry terwyl sy nader kom, "met julle twee wat die hele tyd om my draai, sal daardie Snip in my mou moet vlieg, ek sal dit nooit gevang kry nie. Gaan terug na die res van die span en los my uit. Ek sal die Moker self hanteer."

"Moenie simpel wees nie," sê Fred, "hy sal jou kop afslaan."

Wood kyk van Harry na die Weasleys.

"Oliver, dit is malligheid," sê Alicia Spinnet ergerlik. "Jy kan nie dat Harry daardie ding op sy eie probeer keer nie. Kom ons vra 'n ondersoek aan –"

"As ons nou stop, verbeur ons die wedstryd!" sê Harry. "En ons gaan nie teen Slibberin verloor net oor 'n mal Moker nie! Komaan, Oliver, sê hulle moet my uitlos!"

"Dis alles jou skuld," sê George vies aan Wood. "'Kry daardie Snip, of sterf,' – wat 'n belaglike ding om vir hom te sê!"

Madame Hooch is by hulle.

"Is julle gereed om voort te gaan met die wedstryd?" vra sy vir Wood. Wood kyk na die vasberade trek op Harry se gesig.

"Ons is reg," sê hy. "Fred, George, julle het vir Harry gehoor – los hom uit dat hy die Moker self hanteer."

Dit reën nou baie harder. Toe Madame Hooch se fluitjie blaas, skop Harry hard weg en hoor die bekende whoesj-geluid wat die Moker kort

agter hom maak. Hoër en hoër klim Harry. Hy kantel en duik, kap esse en draaie en rol om en om. Hoewel hy effens dronkerig is, hou hy sy oë wyd oop. Die reën maak spikkels op sy brilglase en hardloop by sy neusgate in terwyl hy onderstebo hang in 'n poging om nog 'n blitsaanval van die Moker af te weer. Hy hoor hoe die skare lag; hy weet hy moet baie simpel lyk, maar die dol Moker is swaar en kan nie so vinnig van koers verander soos hy nie. Hy trek weg en sigsag om die baan en loer deur skrefiesoë deur die silwer reënvlae na die Griffindor-doelpale waar Adriaan Pienaar probeer om verby Wood te kom . . .

'n Gefluit in Harry se ore sê vir hom dat die Moker hom weer eens net-net gemis het; hy draai skerp en laat vat in die teenoorgestelde rigting.

“Oefen jy jou balletpassies, Potter?” gil Malfoy toe Harry 'n verspotte soort dwarrelende draai in die lug moet maak om die Moker te ontduik. Harry vlieg weg met die Moker kort op sy hakke: dis toe hy vol wrewel terugkyk na Malfoy, dat hy dit sien, *die Goue Snip*. Dit hang 'n paar sentimeters bo Malfoy se linkeroor – en Malfoy lag so hard vir Harry, dat hy dit glad nie merk nie.

Vir een folterende oomblik hang Harry in die lug, hy kan dit nie waag om op Malfoy af te storm nie; sê nou hy kyk op en sien die Snip?

BOEF!

Hy het net 'n oomblik te lank gedraai. Die Moker tref hom teen die elmboog en Harry voel hoe sy arm breek. Half deurmekaar van die brandende pyn in sy arm, glip hy sydelings oor die sopnat besem, een knie nog steeds daarom gebuig, terwyl sy regterarm nutteloos langs hom hang. Die Moker storm nader vir nog 'n aanval, hierdie keer pyl dit op sy gesig af. Daar is net een gedagte in Harry se verdoofde brein toe hy wild swenk: *hy moet by Malfoy kom*.

Deur 'n waas van reën en pyn duik hy af op die glinsterende, grinnikende gesig onder hom en sien hoe die oë wyd word van vrees: Malfoy dink dat Harry hom aanval.

“Wat de –” begin Malfoy en snak na asem. Toe maak hy hom uit die voete.

Harry los die besemstok met sy oorblywende hand en gryp wild; hy voel hoe sy vingers om die koue Snip sluit; nou klou hy die besem net met sy bene vas en daar is 'n kreet uit die skare toe hy reguit op die grond afpyl terwyl hy verbete veg om nie flou te word nie.

Met 'n modderige slag tref hy die grond en rol van sy besem af. Sy arm hang heeltemal skeef. Hy doen sy bes om op die Snip wat hy in sy goeie hand vashou, te konsentreer. Bleek van die pyn hoor hy, iewers in die verte, 'n dawerende geraas en 'n gefluit.

“Aha,” sê hy dofweg, “ons het gewen.”

Toe word hy flou.

Toe hy bykom, lê hy nog steeds op die veld, met die reën wat in sy

gesig val en iemand wat oor hom leun. Hy sien 'n dubbele ry glinsterende tande.

“O, nee, net nie jy nie,” kreun hy.

“Weet nie wat hy sê nie,” sê Lockhart hard vir die benoude groep Grif-indors wat om hulle saamdrom. “Moet jou oor niks bekommer nie, Harry. Ek sal jou arm regsien.”

“Nee!” sê Harry. “Ek wil dit so hou, dankie . . .”

Hy probeer regop kom, maar die pyn is ondraaglik. Hy hoor 'n bekende geklik daar naby.

“Ek wil nie foto's hiervan hê nie, Colin,” sê hy hard.

“Lê terug, Harry,” sê Lockhart troostend. “Dis 'n baie eenvoudige toewerspreuk wat ek al male sonder tal gebruik het.”

“Hoekom kan ek nie net siekeboeg toe gaan nie?” sê Harry deur geklemde kake.

“Hy moet eintlik, professor Lockhart,” sê 'n modderige Wood wat nie anders kan as om te glimlag nie, al is sy Soeker beseer. “Wonderlike vangskoot, Harry, werklik 'n ongelooflike vertoning, jou beste ooit, sou ek sê.”

Deur die woud van bene om hom sien Harry hoe Fred en George sukkel om die mal Moker in die houer vas te maak. Die bal sit homself nog steeds verwoed teen.

“Staan terug,” sê Lockhart en rol sy smaraggroen moue op.

“Nee – moenie –” keer Harry swakkies, maar Lockhart swaai reeds sy towerstaf en 'n oomblik later rig hy dit op Harry se arm.

'n Snaakse en onaangename sensasie begin by Harry se skouer en versprei tot in sy vingerpunte. Dit voel of sy arm afgeblaas word. Hy durf dit nie waag om te kyk wat aangaan nie. Hy maak sy oë toe en draai sy gesig weg, maar sy ergste vrese word bewaarheid toe hy hoor hoe die mense om hom na asem snak en hoe Colin Creevey wild begin foto's neem. Sy arm is glad nie meer seer nie – maar dit voel ook hoegenaamd nie meer soos 'n arm nie.

“A,” sê Lockhart. “Ja. Wel, dit gebeur soms. Die punt is dat die bene nie meer gebreek is nie. Dis wat 'n mens in gedagte moet hou. So, Harry, draf gou oor siekeboeg toe – a, mnr. Weasley, mej. La Grange, sal julle saam met hom stap? – Madame Pomfrey sal darem seker daartoe in staat wees om – h'm – dinge so 'n bietjie af te rond.”

Toe Harry opstaan, voel hy vreemd skeef. Hy haal diep asem en kyk na sy regterkant. Wat hy sien, laat hom amper weer flou word.

Aan die punt van sy kleed steek iets uit wat soos 'n dik, vleeskleurige rubberhandskoen lyk. Hy probeer sy vingers roer. Niks gebeur nie.

Lockhart het nie Harry se bene laat vasgroeï nie. Hy het hulle verwyder.

Madame Pomfrey is allesbehalwe in haar skik.

“Jy moes reguit hierheen gekom het!” raas sy en bevoel die slap oorblyfsel van ’n ledemaat wat ’n halfuur gelede ’n werkende arm was. “Dis ’n paar sekondes se werk om ’n gebreekte been reg te maak – maar om beendere terug te laat groei –”

“U kan dit doen, of hoe?” vra Harry benoud.

“Ek kan, baie beslis, maar dit is pynlik,” sê Madame Pomfrey grimmig en gooi ’n pak pajamas na Harry. “Jy sal vannag hier moet bly . . .”

Hermien wag buite die gordyn wat om Harry se bed getrek is terwyl Ron hom help om die pajamas aan te trek. Dit neem nogal lank om die rubberige, beenlose arm deur die mou te kry.

“Jy kom seker nie nou nog vir Lockhart op nie, hè, Hermien?” roep Ron deur die gordyn terwyl hy Harry se slap vingers deur die punt van die mou trek. “As Harry ’n ontbeende arm wou hê, sou hy darem seker so gesê het.”

“Enigiemand kan ’n fout maak,” sê Hermien, “en dis darem nie meer seer nie, nè, Harry?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “maar dit beteken ook niks.”

Hy swaai homself op die bed en die arm flap nutteloos langs hom.

Hermien en Madame Pomfrey verskyn om die gordyn. Madame Pomfrey hou ’n groot bottel vas waarin iets met die naam “Skele-Groei” is.

“Daar wag ’n swaar nag op jou,” sê sy terwyl sy ’n beker vol van die stomende vloeistof vir hom aangee. “Om bene terug te groei, is ’n nare affêre.”

So ook om Skele-Groei te drink. Dit brand Harry se mond en keel en laat hom hoes en proes. Toe sy uitstap, maak Madame Pomfrey t-t-geluide oor gevaarlike sportsoorte en onbekwame onderwysers en Ron en Hermien help vir Harry om ’n paar slukkies water te drink.

“Gelukkig het ons darem gewen,” sê Ron en ’n breë glimlag sprei oor sy gesig. “Dit was omtrent ’n vangskoot. Malfoy se gesig . . . hy’t gelyk of hy jou wil vermoor!”

“Ek sal graag wil weet wat hy aan daardie Moker gedoen het,” sê Hermien omgekrap.

“Ons sit dit by die lys vrae wat ons wil vra wanneer ons die Polisouspaljas gedrink het,” sê Harry terwyl hy terugsink teen die kussings. “Ek hoop net dit smaak beter as hierdie goed . . .”

“Met stukkies Slibberins daarin? Jy maak seker ’n grap,” sê Ron.

Op daardie oomblik bars die deur oop. Dis die res van die sopnat en smerige lede van die Griffindor-span wat vir Harry kom kuier.

“Ongelooflike vliegwerk, Harry,” sê George. “Ek het nou net gesien hoe Marcus Flint vir Malfoy uitskel. Iets oor die Snip daar reg bo sy kop en hy wat te toe is om dit agter te kom. Malfoy lyk nie baie gelukkig nie.”

Hulle bring koekies, lekkers en bottels vol pampoensap; hulle drom saam om Harry se bed en is op die punt om lekker partytjie te begin hou

toe Madame Pomfrey nader storm en skree, “Hierdie seun het rus nodig, hy moet drie-en-dertig bene hergroeï! Uit! UIT!”

So word Harry alleen gelaat, met niks om sy aandag af te trek van die vretende pyn in sy slap arm nie.

Ure en ure later word Harry skielik in die pikdonkerte wakker en hy gee ’n klein gillettjie van pyn: dit voel of sy arm vol groot splinters is. Vir ’n oomblik dink hy dis waarvan hy wakker geword het. Toe, met ’n rilling van skok, besef hy daar is iemand in die donkerte wat besig is om sy voorkop af te spons.

“Gaan weg!” sê hy hard, en toe, “Dobbi!”

Die huis-elf se uitpeul-tennisbaloë tuur deur die duisternis na Harry. ’n Enkele traan loop langs sy lang puntneus af.

“Harry Potter het skool toe gekom,” fluister hy mistroostig. “Dobbi het Harry Potter gewaarsku en gewaarsku. Ag, meneer, hoekom het u nie na Dobbi geluister nie? Hoekom het Harry Potter nie huis toe gegaan toe hy die trein verpas het nie?”

Harry hys homself op teen sy kussings en stoot Dobbi se spons weg.

“Wat maak jy hier?” sê hy. “En hoe weet jy dat ek die trein verpas het?”

Dobbi se lip bewe en ’n nare vermoede pak Harry beet.

“Dit was jy!” sê hy stadig. “Jy het gemaak dat ons nie deur die versper-ring kon kom nie!”

“Inderdaad, ja, meneer,” sê Dobbi en knik sy kop so woes dat sy ore flap. “Dobbi het weggekrui en gewag dat Harry Potter moet kom en toe het hy die deurgang verseël en daarna het Dobbi sy hande met die yster gestryk –” hy wys tien lang vingers wat in verbande toegewikkel is, “ – maar Dobbi het nie omgee nie, meneer, want hy het gedink dat Harry Potter veilig is, en Dobbi het nooit kon droom dat Harry Potter op ’n ander manier by die skool sou kom nie!”

Hy wieg heen en weer en skud sy lelike kop.

“Dobbi was so geskok toe hy hoor dat Harry Potter terug is by Hog-warts dat hy sy meester se aandete verbrand het! So ’n drag slae het Dob-bi nog nooit gehad nie, meneer . . .”

Harry sak af teen sy kussings.

“Jy het so amper gemaak dat ek en Ron geskors is,” sê hy kwaai. “Jy moet maak dat jy wegkom voor my bene teruggegroeï het, Dobbi, of ek draai jou nek vir jou om.”

Dobbi glimlag floutjies.

“Dobbi is gewoond daaraan om met die dood gedreig te word, meneer. By die huis hoor Dobbi dit ten minste vyf keer elke dag.”

Hy blaas sy neus aan ’n punt van die vuil kussingsloop wat hy aanhet en hy lyk so mistroostig dat Harry voel hoe sy woede ondanks van alles, verdwyn.

“Hoekom dra jy daardie ding, Dobbi?” vra hy nuuskierig.

“Dit, meneer?” sê Dobbi en pluk-pluk aan die kussingsloop. “Dit is ’n teken van die huis-elf se verknegting, meneer. Dobbi kan net vry word as sy meester vir hom klere gee, meneer. Die familie is baie versigtig, hulle gee nie eens ’n sokkie vir Dobbi nie, meneer, want dan sal hy vry wees om vir altyd van hulle af weg te gaan.”

Dobbi vryf oor sy groot uitpeuloë en sê skielik, “Harry Potter *moet* huis toe gaan! Dobbi het gedink dat sy Moker genoeg sal wees om te maak dat –”

“Jou Moker?” sê Harry en hy word sommer van voor af kwaad, “Wat bedoel jy met *jou* Moker? Het jy daardie ding getoor om my dood te maak?”

“Nie doodmaak nie, meneer, nooit doodmaak nie!” sê Dobbi geskok. “Dobbi wil Harry Potter se lewe red! Beter om hom huis toe te stuur, ernstig beseer, as dat hy hier bly, meneer! Dobbi wil hê Harry Potter moet net erg genoeg seerkry om huis toe gestuur te word!”

“O, so dis al?” sê Harry kwaad. “Ek veronderstel jy gaan *nie* vir my sê hoekom jy my so graag in stukkies huis toe wil stuur nie?”

“Ag, as Harry Potter net kon weet!” kreun Dobbi en nog meer trane drup op sy vertoingde kussingsloop. “As hy net kan weet wat hy vir ons beteken, die laagstes van die laes, die slawe, die skuim van die toorwêreld! Dobbi onthou hoe dit was toe Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie magtig was, meneer! Ons huis-elwe is soos vuilgoed behandel! Natuurlik word Dobbi nog altyd so behandel, meneer,” erken hy en droog sy gesig aan sy kussingsloop af. “Maar die lewe het tog beter geword vir my soort toe u vir Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie verslaan het. Harry Potter het bly leef en die Donker Heer se mag is gebreek en dit was ’n nuwe toekoms, meneer, en Harry Potter het geskyn soos ’n lamp van hoop vir diegene wat gedink het die Donker Dae sal nooit tot ’n einde kom nie, meneer . . . En nou gaan vreeslike dinge by Hogwarts gebeur, gebeur dalk al reeds, en Dobbi kan nie toelaat dat Harry Potter hier bly nie, want die geskiedenis gaan homself herhaal noudat die Kamer van Geheimenisse weer oop is . . .”

Dobbi vries, geskok. Toe gryp hy Harry se waterbeker van sy bedkassie af, slaan homself oor die kop en val onderstebo af. ’n Paar oomblikke later klouter hy weer terug op die bed, en fluister skeeloog, “Slegte Dobbi, baie slegte Dobbi . . .”

“Daar is dus ’n Kamer van Geheimenisse?” fluister Harry. “En – het jy gesê dis tevore al oopgemaak? *Antwoord* my, Dobbi!”

Hy gryp die elf se benerige gewrig toe Dobbi se hand weer na die waterbeker beweeg. “Maar albei my ouers is nie Moggels nie – hoe kan ek in gevaar verkeer?”

“Ag, meneer, moenie meer van die arme Dobbi vra nie,” stamel die elf

en sy oë is enorm in die duisternis. “Donker dade word in hierdie plek beplan, maar Harry Potter moenie hier wees wanneer dit gebeur nie. Gaan huis toe, Harry Potter. Gaan huis toe. Harry Potter moenie inmeng nie, meneer, dis te gevaarlik –”

“Wie is dit, Dobbi?” sê Harry en hou Dobbi se gewrig stewig vas om te keer dat hy homself weer met die waterbeker slaan. “Wie het dit oopgemaak? Wie het dit die vorige keer oopgemaak?”

“Dobbi kan nie, meneer, Dobbi kan nie, Dobbi mag nie sê nie!” skree die elf. “Gaan net huis toe, Harry Potter, gaan huis toe!”

“Ek gaan nêrens nie!” sê Harry kwaai. “Een van my beste vriende het Moggelouers, sy’s dalk voor in die tou as die Kamer regtig oop is –”

“Harry Potter waag sy lewe vir sy vriende!” steun Dobbi in ’n soort wanhopige ekstase. “So edel! So dapper! Maar hy moet homself red, hy moet, Harry Potter moenie –”

Skielik word Dobbi stil, sy vlermuisore bewe. Harry het dit ook gehoor. Daar kom voetstappe met die gang af.

“Dobbi moet gaan!” sê die elf beangs; daar is ’n harde klapgeluid en toe klem Harry net lug in sy vuus. Hy val terug teen sy kussings, sy oë op die siekeboeg se donker deur, terwyl die voetstappe al nader kom.

Die volgende oomblik kom Dompeldorius agteruit by die slaapsaal ingestap. Hy dra ’n lang wollerige kamerjas en ’n nagmus. Hy het die een end van iets wat soos ’n standbeeld lyk, beet. ’n Paar oomblikke later verskyn professor McGonagall met die voete. Saam lig hulle dit op ’n bed.

“Roep vir Madame Pomfrey,” fluister Dompeldorius en professor McGonagall skarrel verby Harry se bed en verdwyn buite toe. Harry lê doodstil en maak of hy slaap. Hy hoor dringende stemme en toe kom professor McGonagall aangeswiep en op haar hakke volg Madame Pomfrey wat ’n trui oor haar nagrok aansukkel. Harry hoor hoe sy haar asem skerp intrek.

“Wat het gebeur?” fluister Madame Pomfrey vir Dompeldorius en buk oor die standbeeld op die bed.

“Nog ’n aanval,” sê Dompeldorius. “Minerva het hom op die trappe gekry.”

“Daar was ’n tros druiwe langs hom,” sê professor McGonagall. “Ons vermoed hy was op pad hierheen om vir Potter te kom besoek.”

Harry se maag trek pynlik saam. Stadig en versigtig lig hy homself net so dat hy die standbeeld op die bed kan sien. ’n Maanstraal val oor die starende gesig.

Dit is Colin Creevey. Sy oë is wydoop en in sy hande wat voor hom uitgestrek is, hou hy sy kamera.

“Versteen?” fluister Madame Pomfrey.

“Ja,” sê professor McGonagall. “Maar ek sidder om te dink . . . As Albus nie op pad ondertoe was om warm kakao te gaan haal nie, wie weet wat kon . . .”

Die drie van hulle staar na Colin. Toe leun Dompeldorius oor en wikkel die kamera uit Colin se starre greep.

“Dink jy hy het dalk ’n foto van sy aanvaller geneem?” sê professor McGonagall opgewonde.

Dompeldorius antwoord nie. Hy maak die agterkant van die kamera oop.

“Grote genade!” sê Madame Pomfrey.

’n Straal stoom ontsnap sissend uit die kamera. Harry, drie beddens daarvandaan, kry die skerp reuk van gebrande plastiek.

“Gesmelt,” sê Madame Pomfrey verwonderd, “heeltemal gesmelt . . .”

“Wat beteken dit, Albus?” vra professor McGonagall dringend.

“Dit beteken,” sê Dompeldorius, “dat die Kamer van Geheimenisse inderdaad weer oop is.”

Madame Pomfrey klap ’n hand oor haar mond. Professor McGonagall staar na Dompeldorius.

“Maar Albus . . . darem seker nie . . . wie?”

“Die vraag is nie wie nie,” sê Dompeldorius, sy oë op Colin. “Die vraag is, hoe . . .”

Van wat Harry op professor McGonagall se gesig kan sien, verstaan sy dit net so min as hy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE DUELING CLUB

Harry woke up on Sunday morning to find the dormitory blazing with winter sunlight and his arm reboned but very stiff. He sat up quickly and looked over at Colin's bed, but it had been blocked from view by the high curtains Harry had changed behind yesterday. Seeing that he was awake, Madam Pomfrey came bustling over with a breakfast tray and then began bending and stretching his arm and fingers.

"All in order," she said as he clumsily fed himself porridge left-handed. "When you've finished eating, you may leave."

Harry dressed as quickly as he could and hurried off to Gryffindor Tower, desperate to tell Ron and Hermione about Colin and Dobby, but they weren't there. Harry left to look for them, wondering where they could have got to and feeling slightly hurt that they weren't interested in whether he had his bones back or not.

As Harry passed the library, Percy Weasley strolled out of it,

looking in far better spirits than last time they'd met.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he said. "Excellent flying yesterday, really excellent. Gryffindor has just taken the lead for the House Cup — you earned fifty points!"

"You haven't seen Ron or Hermione, have you?" said Harry.

"No, I haven't," said Percy, his smile fading. "I hope Ron's not in another *girls' toilet*. . . ."

Harry forced a laugh, watched Percy walk out of sight, and then headed straight for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He couldn't see why Ron and Hermione would be in there again, but after making sure that neither Filch nor any prefects were around, he opened the door and heard their voices coming from a locked stall.

"It's me," he said, closing the door behind him. There was a clunk, a splash, and a gasp from within the stall and he saw Hermione's eye peering through the keyhole.

"*Harry!*" she said. "You gave us such a fright — come in — how's your arm?"

"Fine," said Harry, squeezing into the stall. An old cauldron was perched on the toilet, and a crackling from under the rim told Harry they had lit a fire beneath it. Conjuring up portable, waterproof fires was a speciality of Hermione's.

"We'd've come to meet you, but we decided to get started on the Polyjuice Potion," Ron explained as Harry, with difficulty, locked the stall again. "We've decided this is the safest place to hide it."

Harry started to tell them about Colin, but Hermione interrupted.

"We already know — we heard Professor McGonagall telling Professor Flitwick this morning. That's why we decided we'd better

get going —”

“The sooner we get a confession out of Malfoy, the better,” snarled Ron. “D’you know what I think? He was in such a foul temper after the Quidditch match, he took it out on Colin.”

“There’s something else,” said Harry, watching Hermione tearing bundles of knotgrass and throwing them into the potion. “Dobby came to visit me in the middle of the night.”

Ron and Hermione looked up, amazed. Harry told them everything Dobby had told him — or hadn’t told him. Hermione and Ron listened with their mouths open.

“The Chamber of Secrets has been opened *before*?” Hermione said.

“This settles it,” said Ron in a triumphant voice. “Lucius Malfoy must’ve opened the Chamber when he was at school here and now he’s told dear old Draco how to do it. It’s obvious. Wish Dobby’d told you what kind of monster’s in there, though. I want to know how come nobody’s noticed it sneaking around the school.”

“Maybe it can make itself invisible,” said Hermione, prodding leeches to the bottom of the cauldron. “Or maybe it can disguise itself — pretend to be a suit of armor or something — I’ve read about Chameleon Ghouls —”

“You read too much, Hermione,” said Ron, pouring dead lacewings on top of the leeches. He crumpled up the empty lacewing bag and looked at Harry.

“So Dobby stopped us from getting on the train and broke your arm. . . .” He shook his head. “You know what, Harry? If he doesn’t stop trying to save your life he’s going to kill you.”

The news that Colin Creevey had been attacked and was now lying as though dead in the hospital wing had spread through the entire school by Monday morning. The air was suddenly thick with rumor and suspicion. The first years were now moving around the castle in tight-knit groups, as though scared they would be attacked if they ventured forth alone.

Ginny Weasley, who sat next to Colin Creevey in Charms, was distraught, but Harry felt that Fred and George were going the wrong way about cheering her up. They were taking turns covering themselves with fur or boils and jumping out at her from behind statues. They only stopped when Percy, apoplectic with rage, told them he was going to write to Mrs. Weasley and tell her Ginny was having nightmares.

Meanwhile, hidden from the teachers, a roaring trade in talismans, amulets, and other protective devices was sweeping the school. Neville Longbottom bought a large, evil-smelling green onion, a pointed purple crystal, and a rotting newt tail before the other Gryffindor boys pointed out that he was in no danger; he was a pureblood, and therefore unlikely to be attacked.

“They went for Filch first,” Neville said, his round face fearful. “And everyone knows I’m almost a Squib.”

In the second week of December Professor McGonagall came around as usual, collecting names of those who would be staying at school for Christmas. Harry, Ron, and Hermione signed her list; they had heard that Malfoy was staying, which struck them as very suspicious. The holidays would be the perfect time to use the Polyjuice Potion and try to worm a confession out of him.

Unfortunately, the potion was only half finished. They still needed the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin, and the only place they were going to get them was from Snape's private stores. Harry privately felt he'd rather face Slytherin's legendary monster than let Snape catch him robbing his office.

"What we need," said Hermione briskly as Thursday afternoon's double Potions lesson loomed nearer, "is a diversion. Then one of us can sneak into Snape's office and take what we need."

Harry and Ron looked at her nervously.

"I think I'd better do the actual stealing," Hermione continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "You two will be expelled if you get into any more trouble, and I've got a clean record. So all you need to do is cause enough mayhem to keep Snape busy for five minutes or so."

Harry smiled feebly. Deliberately causing mayhem in Snape's Potions class was about as safe as poking a sleeping dragon in the eye.

Potions lessons took place in one of the large dungeons. Thursday afternoon's lesson proceeded in the usual way. Twenty cauldrons stood steaming between the wooden desks, on which stood brass scales and jars of ingredients. Snape prowled through the fumes, making waspish remarks about the Gryffindors' work while the Slytherins sniggered appreciatively. Draco Malfoy, who was Snape's favorite student, kept flicking puffer-fish eyes at Ron and Harry, who knew that if they retaliated they would get detention faster than you could say "Unfair."

Harry's Swelling Solution was far too runny, but he had his mind on more important things. He was waiting for Hermione's signal, and

he hardly listened as Snape paused to sneer at his watery potion. When Snape turned and walked off to bully Neville, Hermione caught Harry's eye and nodded.

Harry ducked swiftly down behind his cauldron, pulled one of Fred's Filibuster fireworks out of his pocket, and gave it a quick prod with his wand. The firework began to fizz and sputter. Knowing he had only seconds, Harry straightened up, took aim, and lobbed it into the air; it landed right on target in Goyle's cauldron.

Goyle's potion exploded, showering the whole class. People shrieked as splashes of the Swelling Solution hit them. Malfoy got a faceful and his nose began to swell like a balloon; Goyle blundered around, his hands over his eyes, which had expanded to the size of a dinner plate — Snape was trying to restore calm and find out what had happened. Through the confusion, Harry saw Hermione slip quietly into Snape's office.

"Silence! SILENCE!" Snape roared. "Anyone who has been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draught — when I find out who did this —"

Harry tried not to laugh as he watched Malfoy hurry forward, his head drooping with the weight of a nose like a small melon. As half the class lumbered up to Snape's desk, some weighted down with arms like clubs, others unable to talk through gigantic puffed-up lips, Harry saw Hermione slide back into the dungeon, the front of her robes bulging.

When everyone had taken a swig of antidote and the various swellings had subsided, Snape swept over to Goyle's cauldron and scooped out the twisted black remains of the firework. There was a

sudden hush.

“If I ever find out who threw this,” Snape whispered, “I shall *make sure* that person is expelled.”

Harry arranged his face into what he hoped was a puzzled expression. Snape was looking right at him, and the bell that rang ten minutes later could not have been more welcome.

“He knew it was me,” Harry told Ron and Hermione as they hurried back to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. “I could tell.”

Hermione threw the new ingredients into the cauldron and began to stir feverishly.

“It’ll be ready in two weeks,” she said happily.

“Snape can’t prove it was you,” said Ron reassuringly to Harry. “What can he do?”

“Knowing Snape, something foul,” said Harry as the potion frothed and bubbled.

A week later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were walking across the entrance hall when they saw a small knot of people gathered around the notice board, reading a piece of parchment that had just been pinned up. Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas beckoned them over, looking excited.

“They’re starting a Dueling Club!” said Seamus. “First meeting tonight! I wouldn’t mind dueling lessons; they might come in handy one of these days. . . .”

“What, you reckon Slytherin’s monster can duel?” said Ron, but he, too, read the sign with interest.

“Could be useful,” he said to Harry and Hermione as they went

into dinner. “Shall we go?”

Harry and Hermione were all for it, so at eight o’clock that evening they hurried back to the Great Hall. The long dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black once more and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited.

“I wonder who’ll be teaching us?” said Hermione as they edged into the chattering crowd. “Someone told me Flitwick was a dueling champion when he was young — maybe it’ll be him.”

“As long as it’s not —” Harry began, but he ended on a groan: Gilderoy Lockhart was walking onto the stage, resplendent in robes of deep plum and accompanied by none other than Snape, wearing his usual black.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called, “Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!

“Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions — for full details, see my published works.

“Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape,” said Lockhart, flashing a wide smile. “He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don’t want any of you youngsters to worry — you’ll still have your Potions master when I’m through with him, never fear!”

“Wouldn’t it be good if they finished each other off?” Ron muttered

in Harry's ear.

Snape's upper lip was curling. Harry wondered why Lockhart was still smiling; if Snape had been looking at *him* like that he'd have been running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Lockhart and Snape turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Lockhart did, with much twirling of his hands, whereas Snape jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Harry murmured, watching Snape baring his teeth.

"One — two — three —"

Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "*Expelliarmus!*" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet. He flew backward off the stage, smashed into the wall, and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins cheered. Hermione was dancing on tiptoes. "Do you think he's all right?" she squealed through her fingers.

"Who cares?" said Harry and Ron together.

Lockhart was getting unsteadily to his feet. His hat had fallen off and his wavy hair was standing on end.

"Well, there you have it!" he said, tottering back onto the platform.

“That was a Disarming Charm — as you see, I’ve lost my wand — ah, thank you, Miss Brown — yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don’t mind my saying so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy — however, I felt it would be instructive to let them see . . .”

Snape was looking murderous. Possibly Lockhart had noticed, because he said, “Enough demonstrating! I’m going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you’d like to help me —”

They moved through the crowd, matching up partners. Lockhart teamed Neville with Justin Finch-Fletchley, but Snape reached Harry and Ron first.

“Time to split up the dream team, I think,” he sneered. “Weasley, you can partner Finnigan. Potter —”

Harry moved automatically toward Hermione.

“I don’t think so,” said Snape, smiling coldly. “Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let’s see what you make of the famous Potter. And you, Miss Granger — you can partner Miss Bulstrode.”

Malfoy strutted over, smirking. Behind him walked a Slytherin girl who reminded Harry of a picture he’d seen in *Holidays with Hags*. She was large and square and her heavy jaw jutted aggressively. Hermione gave her a weak smile that she did not return.

“Face your partners!” called Lockhart, back on the platform. “And bow!”

Harry and Malfoy barely inclined their heads, not taking their eyes off each other.

“Wands at the ready!” shouted Lockhart. “When I count to three, cast your charms to Disarm your opponents — *only* to disarm them — we don’t want any accidents — one . . . two . . . three —”

Harry swung his wand high, but Malfoy had already started on “two”: His spell hit Harry so hard he felt as though he’d been hit over the head with a saucepan. He stumbled, but everything still seemed to be working, and wasting no more time, Harry pointed his wand straight at Malfoy and shouted, “*Rictusempra!*”

A jet of silver light hit Malfoy in the stomach and he doubled up, wheezing.

“*I said Disarm only!*” Lockhart shouted in alarm over the heads of the battling crowd, as Malfoy sank to his knees; Harry had hit him with a Tickling Charm, and he could barely move for laughing. Harry hung back, with a vague feeling it would be unsporting to bewitch Malfoy while he was on the floor, but this was a mistake; gasping for breath, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry’s knees, choked, “*Tarantallegra!*” and the next second Harry’s legs began to jerk around out of his control in a kind of quickstep.

“Stop! Stop!” screamed Lockhart, but Snape took charge.

“*Finite Incantatem!*” he shouted; Harry’s feet stopped dancing, Malfoy stopped laughing, and they were able to look up.

A haze of greenish smoke was hovering over the scene. Both Neville and Justin were lying on the floor, panting; Ron was holding up an ashen-faced Seamus, apologizing for whatever his broken wand had done; but Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode were still moving; Millicent had Hermione in a headlock and Hermione was whimpering in pain; both their wands lay forgotten on the floor.

Harry leapt forward and pulled Millicent off. It was difficult: She was a lot bigger than he was.

“Dear, dear,” said Lockhart, skittering through the crowd, looking at the aftermath of the duels. “Up you go, Macmillan. . . . Careful there, Miss Fawcett. . . . Pinch it hard, it’ll stop bleeding in a second, Boot —

“I think I’d better teach you how to *block* unfriendly spells,” said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. “Let’s have a volunteer pair — Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you —”

“A bad idea, Professor Lockhart,” said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat. “Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We’ll be sending what’s left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox.” Neville’s round, pink face went pinker. “How about Malfoy and Potter?” said Snape with a twisted smile.

“Excellent idea!” said Lockhart, gesturing Harry and Malfoy into the middle of the hall as the crowd backed away to give them room.

“Now, Harry,” said Lockhart. “When Draco points his wand at you, you do *this*.”

He raised his own wand, attempted a complicated sort of wiggling action, and dropped it. Snape smirked as Lockhart quickly picked it up, saying, “Whoops — my wand is a little overexcited —”

Snape moved closer to Malfoy, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Malfoy smirked, too. Harry looked up nervously at Lockhart and said, “Professor, could you show me that blocking

thing again?"

"Scared?" muttered Malfoy, so that Lockhart couldn't hear him.

"You wish," said Harry out of the corner of his mouth.

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder. "Just do what I did, Harry!"

"What, drop my wand?"

But Lockhart wasn't listening.

"Three — two — one — go!" he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, "*Serpensortia!*"

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the crowd backed swiftly away, clearing the floor.

"Don't move, Potter," said Snape lazily, clearly enjoying the sight of Harry standing motionless, eye to eye with the angry snake. "I'll get rid of it. . . ."

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack. Enraged, hissing furiously, it slithered straight toward Justin Finch-Fletchley and raised itself again, fangs exposed, poised to strike.

Harry wasn't sure what made him do it. He wasn't even aware of deciding to do it. All he knew was that his legs were carrying him forward as though he was on casters and that he had shouted stupidly at the snake, "Leave him alone!" And miraculously — inexplicably — the snake slumped to the floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Harry. Harry felt the fear drain out of him. He

knew the snake wouldn't attack anyone now, though how he knew it, he couldn't have explained.

He looked up at Justin, grinning, expecting to see Justin looking relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful — but certainly not angry and scared.

“What do you think you're playing at?” he shouted, and before Harry could say anything, Justin had turned and stormed out of the hall.

Snape stepped forward, waved his wand, and the snake vanished in a small puff of black smoke. Snape, too, was looking at Harry in an unexpected way: It was a shrewd and calculating look, and Harry didn't like it. He was also dimly aware of an ominous muttering all around the walls. Then he felt a tugging on the back of his robes.

“Come on,” said Ron's voice in his ear. “Move — come *on* —”

Ron steered him out of the hall, Hermione hurrying alongside them. As they went through the doors, the people on either side drew away as though they were frightened of catching something. Harry didn't have a clue what was going on, and neither Ron nor Hermione explained anything until they had dragged him all the way up to the empty Gryffindor common room. Then Ron pushed Harry into an armchair and said, “You're a Parselmouth. Why didn't you tell us?”

“I'm a what?” said Harry.

“*A Parselmouth!*” said Ron. “You can talk to snakes!”

“I know,” said Harry. “I mean, that's only the second time I've ever done it. I accidentally set a boa constrictor on my cousin Dudley at the zoo once — long story — but it was telling me it had never seen Brazil and I sort of set it free without meaning to — that was

before I knew I was a wizard —”

“A boa constrictor told you it had never seen Brazil?” Ron repeated faintly.

“So?” said Harry. “I bet loads of people here can do it.”

“Oh, no they can’t,” said Ron. “It’s not a very common gift. Harry, this is bad.”

“What’s bad?” said Harry, starting to feel quite angry. “What’s wrong with everyone? Listen, if I hadn’t told that snake not to attack Justin —”

“Oh, that’s what you said to it?”

“What d’you mean? You were there — you heard me —”

“I heard you speaking Parseltongue,” said Ron. “Snake language. You could have been saying anything — no wonder Justin panicked, you sounded like you were egging the snake on or something — it was creepy, you know —”

Harry gaped at him.

“I spoke a different language? But — I didn’t realize — how can I speak a language without knowing I can speak it?”

Ron shook his head. Both he and Hermione were looking as though someone had died. Harry couldn’t see what was so terrible.

“D’you want to tell me what’s wrong with stopping a massive snake biting off Justin’s head?” he said. “What does it matter *how* I did it as long as Justin doesn’t have to join the Headless Hunt?”

“It matters,” said Hermione, speaking at last in a hushed voice, “because being able to talk to snakes was what Salazar Slytherin was famous for. That’s why the symbol of Slytherin House is a serpent.”

Harry’s mouth fell open.

“Exactly,” said Ron. “And now the whole school’s going to think you’re his great-great-great-great-grandson or something —”

“But I’m not,” said Harry, with a panic he couldn’t quite explain.

“You’ll find that hard to prove,” said Hermione. “He lived about a thousand years ago; for all we know, you could be.”

Harry lay awake for hours that night. Through a gap in the curtains around his four-poster he watched snow starting to drift past the tower window and wondered . . .

Could he be a descendant of Salazar Slytherin? He didn’t know anything about his father’s family, after all. The Dursleys had always forbidden questions about his Wizarding relatives.

Quietly, Harry tried to say something in Parseltongue. The words wouldn’t come. It seemed he had to be face-to-face with a snake to do it.

But I’m in Gryffindor, Harry thought.*The Sorting Hat wouldn’t have put me in here if I had Slytherin blood. . . .*

Ah, said a nasty little voice in his brain, *but the Sorting Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, don’t you remember?*

Harry turned over. He’d see Justin the next day in Herbology and he’d explain that he’d been calling the snake off, not egging it on, which (he thought angrily, pummeling his pillow) any fool should have realized.

By next morning, however, the snow that had begun in the night had turned into a blizzard so thick that the last Herbology lesson of the term was canceled: Professor Sprout wanted to fit socks and scarves

on the Mandrakes, a tricky operation she would entrust to no one else, now that it was so important for the Mandrakes to grow quickly and revive Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey.

Harry fretted about this next to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, while Ron and Hermione used their time off to play a game of wizard chess.

“For heaven’s sake, Harry,” said Hermione, exasperated, as one of Ron’s bishops wrestled her knight off his horse and dragged him off the board. “Go and *find* Justin if it’s so important to you.”

So Harry got up and left through the portrait hole, wondering where Justin might be.

The castle was darker than it usually was in daytime because of the thick, swirling gray snow at every window. Shivering, Harry walked past classrooms where lessons were taking place, catching snatches of what was happening within. Professor McGonagall was shouting at someone who, by the sound of it, had turned his friend into a badger. Resisting the urge to take a look, Harry walked on by, thinking that Justin might be using his free time to catch up on some work, and deciding to check the library first.

A group of the Hufflepuffs who should have been in Herbology were indeed sitting at the back of the library, but they didn’t seem to be working. Between the long lines of high bookshelves, Harry could see that their heads were close together and they were having what looked like an absorbing conversation. He couldn’t see whether Justin was among them. He was walking toward them when something of what they were saying met his ears, and he paused to listen, hidden in the Invisibility section.

“So anyway,” a stout boy was saying, “I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter’s marked him down as his next victim, it’s best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin’s been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. Justin actually *told* him he’d been down for Eton. That’s not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin’s heir on the loose, is it?”

“You definitely think it *is* Potter, then, Ernie?” said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

“Hannah,” said the stout boy solemnly, “he’s a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that’s the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue.”

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, “Remember what was written on the wall? *Enemies of the Heir, Beware*. Potter had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, Filch’s cat’s attacked. That first year, Creevey, was annoying Potter at the Quidditch match, taking pictures of him while he was lying in the mud. Next thing we know — Creevey’s been attacked.”

“He always seems so nice, though,” said Hannah uncertainly, “and, well, he’s the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. He can’t be all bad, can he?”

Ernie lowered his voice mysteriously, the Hufflepuffs bent closer, and Harry edged nearer so that he could catch Ernie’s words.

“No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard

could have survived a curse like that.” He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, “*That’s* probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn’t want another Dark Lord *competing* with him. I wonder what other powers Potter’s been hiding?”

Harry couldn’t take anymore. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped out from behind the bookshelves. If he hadn’t been feeling so angry, he would have found the sight that greeted him funny: Every one of the Hufflepuffs looked as though they had been Petrified by the sight of him, and the color was draining out of Ernie’s face.

“Hello,” said Harry. “I’m looking for Justin Finch-Fletchley.”

The Hufflepuffs’ worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie.

“What do you want with him?” said Ernie in a quavering voice.

“I wanted to tell him what really happened with that snake at the Dueling Club,” said Harry.

Ernie bit his white lips and then, taking a deep breath, said, “We were all there. We saw what happened.”

“Then you noticed that after I spoke to it, the snake backed off?” said Harry.

“All I saw,” said Ernie stubbornly, though he was trembling as he spoke, “was you speaking Parseltongue and chasing the snake toward Justin.”

“I didn’t chase it at him!” Harry said, his voice shaking with anger. “It didn’t even *touch* him!”

“It was a very near miss,” said Ernie. “And in case you’re getting ideas,” he added hastily, “I might tell you that you can trace my

family back through nine generations of witches and warlocks and my blood's as pure as anyone's, so —”

“I don't care what sort of blood you've got!” said Harry fiercely. “Why would I want to attack Muggle-borns?”

“I've heard you hate those Muggles you live with,” said Ernie swiftly.

“It's not possible to live with the Dursleys and not hate them,” said Harry. “I'd like to see you try it.”

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library, earning himself a reproving glare from Madam Pince, who was polishing the gilded cover of a large spell book.

Harry blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where he was going, he was in such a fury. The result was that he walked into something very large and solid, which knocked him backward onto the floor.

“Oh, hello, Hagrid,” Harry said, looking up.

Hagrid's face was entirely hidden by a woolly, snow-covered balaclava, but it couldn't possibly be anyone else, as he filled most of the corridor in his moleskin overcoat. A dead rooster was hanging from one of his massive, gloved hands.

“All right, Harry?” he said, pulling up the balaclava so he could speak. “Why aren't yeh in class?”

“Canceled,” said Harry, getting up. “What're you doing in here?”

Hagrid held up the limp rooster.

“Second one killed this term,” he explained. “It's either foxes or a Blood-Suckin' Bugbear, an' I need the headmaster's permission ter put a charm around the hen coop.”

He peered more closely at Harry from under his thick, snow-flecked eyebrows.

“Yeh sure yeh’re all righ’? Yeh look all hot an’ bothered —”

Harry couldn’t bring himself to repeat what Ernie and the rest of the Hufflepuffs had been saying about him.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I’d better get going, Hagrid, it’s Transfiguration next and I’ve got to pick up my books.”

He walked off, his mind still full of what Ernie had said about him.

“Justin’s been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. . . .”

Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; the torches had been extinguished by a strong, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane. He was halfway down the passage when he tripped headlong over something lying on the floor.

He turned to squint at what he’d fallen over and felt as though his stomach had dissolved.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was lying on the floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. And that wasn’t all. Next to him was another figure, the strangest sight Harry had ever seen.

It was Nearly Headless Nick, no longer pearly-white and transparent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the floor. His head was half off and his face wore an expression of shock identical to Justin’s.

Harry got to his feet, his breathing fast and shallow, his heart doing a kind of drumroll against his ribs. He looked wildly up and down

the deserted corridor and saw a line of spiders scuttling as fast as they could away from the bodies. The only sounds were the muffled voices of teachers from the classes on either side.

He could run, and no one would ever know he had been there. But he couldn't just leave them lying here. . . . He had to get help. . . . Would anyone believe he hadn't had anything to do with this?

As he stood there, panicking, a door right next to him opened with a bang. Peeves the Poltergeist came shooting out.

“Why, it's potty wee Potter!” cackled Peeves, knocking Harry's glasses askew as he bounced past him. “What's Potter up to? Why's Potter lurking —”

Peeves stopped, halfway through a midair somersault. Upside down, he spotted Justin and Nearly Headless Nick. He flipped the right way up, filled his lungs and, before Harry could stop him, screamed, “ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTAAAACK!”

Crash — crash — crash — door after door flew open along the corridor and people flooded out. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confusion that Justin was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Nearly Headless Nick. Harry found himself pinned against the wall as the teachers shouted for quiet. Professor McGonagall came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair. She used her wand to set off a loud bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes. No sooner had the scene cleared somewhat than Ernie the Hufflepuff arrived, panting, on the scene.

“Caught in the act!” Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing his finger dramatically at Harry.

“That will do, Macmillan!” said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was bobbing overhead, now grinning wickedly, surveying the scene; Peeves always loved chaos. As the teachers bent over Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, examining them, Peeves broke into song:

*“Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,
You’re killing off students, you think it’s good fun —”*

“That’s enough, Peeves!” barked Professor McGonagall, and Peeves zoomed away backward, with his tongue out at Harry.

Justin was carried up to the hospital wing by Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department, but nobody seemed to know what to do for Nearly Headless Nick. In the end, Professor McGonagall conjured a large fan out of thin air, which she gave to Ernie with instructions to waft Nearly Headless Nick up the stairs. This Ernie did, fanning Nick along like a silent black hovercraft. This left Harry and Professor McGonagall alone together.

“This way, Potter,” she said.

“Professor,” said Harry at once, “I swear I didn’t —”

“This is out of my hands, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall curtly.

They marched in silence around a corner and she stopped before a large and extremely ugly stone gargoyle.

“Lemon drop!” she said. This was evidently a password, because

the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Even full of dread for what was coming, Harry couldn't fail to be amazed. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. As he and Professor McGonagall stepped onto it, Harry heard the wall thud closed behind them. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly dizzy, Harry saw a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin.

He knew now where he was being taken. This must be where Dumbledore lived.

Die Tweegevegklub

Toe Harry daardie Sondagoggend wakker word, gloei die siekeboeg met wintersonlig. Sy arm het weer beendere, maar is baie styf.

Hy kom vinnig regop en loer na Colin se bed, maar hy kan niks sien nie, want die hoë gordyne waaragter Harry die vorige dag verklee het, is toegetrek. Toe sy sien dat hy wakker is, kom Madame Pomfrey vinnig nader met ontbyt op 'n skinkbord, en begin daarna om sy arm en vingers te buig en te strek.

“Alles reg,” sê sy terwyl hy homself lompweg met sy linkerhand voer. “Sodra jy klaar geëet het, kan jy maar gaan.”

Harry trek so vinnig as wat hy kan aan en haas hom na die Griffindortoring om so gou moontlik vir Ron en Hermien te vertel van Colin en Dobbi, maar hulle is nie daar nie. Toe Harry uitstap om hulle te gaan soek, wonder hy waar hulle kan wees en voel hy ook 'n bietjie seerge-maak dat hulle nie eens genoeg belang stel om te wil weet of sy bene darem weer teruggegroe het of nie.

Toe hy verby die biblioteek stap, kom Percy Weasley uit en hy lyk heelwat vroliker as die vorige keer toe hulle mekaar raakgeloop het.

“O, hallo, Harry,” sê hy. “Uitstekend gevlieg gister, werklik uitstekend. Griffindor loop voor wat die Huisbeker betref – jy het 'n honderd-en-vyftig punte aangeteken!”

“Het jy dalk vir Ron en Hermien gesien?” vra Harry.

“Nee, ek het nie,” sê Percy en sy glimlag vervaag. “Ek hoop nie Ron is weer in die meisies se kleedkamer nie . . .”

Harry forseer 'n laggie, kyk Percy agterna tot hy buite sig is en gaan toe reguit na Katryn Kermkous se badkamer. Hy kan nie dink wat Ron en Hermien daar sal maak nie, maar toe hy seker is dat nóg Fillis, nóg die prefekte daar rond is, maak hy die deur oop en hoor sowaar hul stemme uit een van die hokkies kom.

“Dis ek,” sê hy en maak die deur agter hom toe. Daar is 'n klonkgeluid en 'n geplas en 'n gesnak na asem vanuit die hokkie; toe sien hy Hermien se oog wat deur die sleutelgat loer.

“Harry!” sê sy. “Jy't ons omtrent laat skrik. Kom in – hoe's jou arm?”

“Oukei,” sê Harry en druk om die deur. ’n Ou hekseketel rus op die toilet en ’n geknetter onder die boom laat hom besef dat daar ’n vuur onder brand. Draagbare, waterbestande vure is Hermien se spesialiteit.

“Ons wou jou gaan haal het, maar toe besluit ons dis dalk beter om solank met die Polisouspaljas te begin,” verduidelik Ron terwyl Harry die toilet met groot moeite weer sluit. “Ons het gedink dis die veiligste plek om dit weg te steek.”

Harry begin om hulle van Colin te vertel, maar Hermien val hom in die rede, “Ons weet al, ons het gehoor toe professor McGonagall vanoggend vir professor Flickerpitt vertel het. Dis hoekom ons besluit het dis beter om maar te begin –”

“Hoe gouer Malfoy erken, hoe beter,” grom Ron. “Weet jy wat dink ek? Hy was in so ’n vieslike bui na die Kwiddiekwedstryd dat hy dit op Colin uitgehaal het.”

“Daar is iets anders,” sê Harry terwyl hy kyk hoe Hermien bondels knoopgras losskeur en in die hekseketel gooi. “Dobbi was in die middel van die nag by my.”

Ron en Hermien kyk verbaas op. Harry vertel hulle alles wat Dobbi gesê het – of nie gesê het nie. Ron en Hermien luister oopmond.

“Die Kamer van Geheimenisse is al *voorheen* oopgemaak?” sê Hermien.

“Daar is die bewys,” sê Ron triomfantlik. “Lucius Malfoy het die Kamer oopgemaak toe hy hier op skool was en nou’t hy vir die liewe klein Draco vertel hoe om dit te doen. Dis so duidelik soos daglig. Ek wens Dobbi het vir jou gesê watter soort monster daarin is. Ek wil weet hoe die ding hier kan rondsluip sonder dat iemand dit sien.”

“Dalk word dit onsigbaar,” sê Hermien en druk die bloedsuiers vinnig af tot op die bodem van die hekseketel. “Of dalk vermom die ding homself – maak of dit ’n wapenrusting is of so iets. Ek het daarvoor gelees in *Transmorf Monsters* . . .”

“Jy lees te veel, Hermien.” Ron gooi die dooie netvlerkige vlieë bo-op die bloedsuiers. Hy frommel die leë sakkie op en kyk om na Harry.

“Dit was dus Dobbi wat gekeer het dat ons op die trein klim en wat jou arm gebreek het . . .” Hy skud sy kop. “Weet jy wat, Harry? As hy nie ophou om jou lewe te probeer red nie, gaan hy jou nog doodmaak.”

Die nuus dat Colin Creevey aangeval is en soos ’n dooie in die siekeboeg lê, het teen Maandagoggend soos ’n veldbrand deur die skool versprei. Die atmosfeer is dik met gerugte en agterdog. Die eerstejaars loop in klein groepies in die kasteel rond, asof hulle bang is dat hulle aangeval sal word as hulle alleen iewers heen gaan.

Ginny Weasley, wat langs Colin Creevey in die Towerspelklas sit, is buite haarself van ontsteltenis, maar Harry voel dat Fred en George die ver-

keerde metodes gebruik om haar op te vrolik. Hulle toor hulself vol swere en hare en maak beurte om van agter standbeelde op Ginny te spring. Hulle hou eers op toe Percy van woede amper 'n beroerte kry en dreig dat hy vir mev. Weasley gaan skryf en haar van Ginny se nagmerries vertel.

Intussen word daar, sonder die onderwysers se wete, lewendig handel gedryf in gelukbringers, amulette en ander beskermende katoeters. Neville Loggerenberg koop 'n groot, groen ui wat verskriklik sleg ruik, 'n gepunte pers kristal en 'n verrotte paddavisstert voor die ander Griffindor-seuns vir hom sê dat hy nie in gevaar verkeer nie: hy is 'n volbloed en sal heel moontlik nie aangeval word nie.

“Hulle het heel eerste vir Fillis getakel,” sê Neville, sy ronde gesig vol vrees, “en almal weet ek is amper 'n Sisser.”

In die tweede week van Desember maak professor McGonagall soos gewoonlik die name bymekaar van almal wat oor die Kersvakansie by die skool gaan bly. Harry, Ron en Hermien teken haar lys; hulle het gehoor dat Malfoy gaan bly, iets wat vir hulle baie agterdogtig klink. Die vakansie sal die ideale geleentheid wees om die Polisouspaljas te gebruik en 'n erkenning uit hom te wurm.

Ongelukkig is die paljas nog net halfpad klaar. Hulle moet nog die verpoeierde horing van 'n Tweehoring en die Boomslangvel kry en die enigste plek waar dit te vinde is, is in Snerp se privaat voorraad. Harry voel stilletjies hy sal veel eerder die legendariese monster van Slibberin takel, as dat Snerp hom moet vang terwyl hy iets uit sy kantoor probeer steel.

“Wat ons nodig het,” sê Hermien toe Donderdagmiddag se dubbele Towerdrankie-klas al nader kom, “is iets wat almal se aandag sal aftrek. Dan kan een van ons by Snerp se kantoor inglip en vat wat ons nodig het.”

Harry en Ron kyk angstig na haar.

“Ek dink ek moet die steelwerk doen,” sê Hermien saaklik. “Julle twee sal beslis geskors word as julle weer in die moeilikheid moet kom, maar ek het 'n skoon rekord. Al wat julle dus moet doen, is om genoeg chaos te skep sodat Snerp vir so vyf minute besig sal wees.”

Harry glimlag swakkies. Om met opset chaos te skep in Snerp se klas is omtrent so veilig as om 'n slapende draak in die oog te steek.

Die Towerdrankie-klasse word in een van die groot kerkers gehou. Donderdagmiddag se klas verloop op die gewone manier. Twintig heksketels staan stomend tussen die houtlessenaars waarop koperskale en fesse vol bestanddele staan. Snerp sluip rond deur die walms en maak snydende aanmerkings oor die Griffindors se werk terwyl die Slibberins vol waardering daaroor grinnik. Draco Malfoy, wat Snerp se gunsteling-student is, hou aan om poffervisoë na Ron en Harry te gooi, want hy weet hulle sal detensie kry, gouer as wat jy “dis onregverdig” kan sê, as hulle net iets sou probeer terugdoen.

Harry se Swelmiddel is heeltemal te loperig, maar hy het belangriker dinge op sy gemoed. Hy wag dat Hermien die teken moet gee en hy hoor skaars toe Snerp iets skerps oor sy waterige towerdrankie sê. Toe Snerp omdraai en wegstap om Neville te gaan boelie, vang Hermien Harry se oog en knik.

Harry koes vinnig agter sy hekseketel weg, haal een van Fred se Vrijbouterklappers uit sy sak en steek dit met sy towerstaf aan die brand. Die klapper begin dadelik spetter en sis. Harry weet hy het net 'n paar sekondes. Hy kom orent, mik en gooi dit die lug in; dit val netjies in die middel van Goliat se hekseketel.

Goliat se towermiddel ontplof en spat oor die hele klas. Mense gil toe spatsels van die Swelmiddel hulle tref. Malfoy kry dit in die gesig en sy neus swel op soos 'n ballon; Goliat strompel rond met sy hande oor oë wat nou so groot soos sopborde is, terwyl Snerp sukkel om die orde te herstel en uit te vind wat gebeur het. Deur die verwarring sien Harry hoe Hermien stilletjies by die deur uitglip.

"Stilte! STILTE!" brul Snerp. "Almal wat raak gespat is, kom dadelik hierheen vir 'n Afblaasdrankie. As ek moet uitvind wie dit gedoen het . . ."

Harry doen sy bes om nie te lag nie, terwyl hy kyk hoe Malfoy hom vorentoe haas met 'n kop wat hang onder die gewig van 'n neus wat soos 'n jong spanspek lyk. Goed die helfte van die klas strompel na Snerp se lessenaar, party met arms soos knuppels en ander wat skaars deur dik pofferlippe kan praat. Uit die hoek van sy oog sien Harry hoe Hermien terugglip met iets wat sy onder haar kleed vashou.

Toe almal 'n sluk van die teenmiddel gevat en die swelsels gesak het, swiep Snerp na Goliat se hekseketel en vis die verwronge swart oorblyfsels van die klapper uit. Daar is 'n skielike stilte.

"As ek moet uitvind wie dit gegooi het," fluister Snerp, "sal ek seker maak dat daardie persoon geskors word."

Harry trek sy gesig op 'n onskuldige plooi. Snerp kyk reguit na hom, en toe die klok tien minute later lui, is daar nie 'n meer welkome geluid as dit nie.

"Hy weet dit was ek," sê Harry vir Ron en Hermien toe hulle terugdraf na Katryn Kermkous se badkamer. "Ek weet sommer."

Hermien gooi die nuwe bestanddele in die hekseketel en roer dit vinnig in.

"Oor twee weke is dit gereed," sê sy in haar noppies.

"Snerp kan niks bewys nie," sê Ron vir Harry. "Wat kan hy doen?"

"Soos ek vir Snerp ken, iets viesliks," sê Harry somber, terwyl die hekseketel vol paljas borrel en kook.

'n Week later stap Harry, Ron en Hermien deur die Ingangsportaal toe hulle 'n groepie mense 'n perkament, wat so pas op die kennisgewing-

bord vasgesteek is, sien lees. Septimus Floris en Dean Thomas wink hulle opgewonde nader.

“Hulle gaan ’n Tweegevegklub begin!” sê Septimus. “Die eerste byeenkoms is vanaand al! Ek sal nie omgee vir tweegeveglesse nie, dit kan dalk een van die dae handig te pas kom . . .”

“Dink jy Slibberin se monster sal ’n tweegeveg kan hou?” sê Ron, maar hy staan tog geïnteresseerd nader om die nota te lees.

“Kan dalk nuttig wees,” sê hy vir Harry en Hermien toe hulle instap vir aandete. “Sal ons gaan?”

Harry en Hermien is lus om te gaan en om agtuur haas hulle hul na die Groot Saal. Die lang eettafels het verdwyn en ’n goue verhoog, verlig deur duisende kerse wat in die lug sweef, het langs een van die mure verskyn. Die plafon is weer fluweelswart en dit lyk of die meeste studente daar is. Almal het hul towerstawwe en lyk baie opgewonde.

“Ek wonder wie gaan vir ons les gee?” sê Hermien toe hulle by die geselsende skare indruk. “Iemand het gesê Flickerpitt was glo ’n tweegevegkampioen op sy dag, dalk is dit hy.”

“Solank dit net nie —” begin Harry, maar hy eindig met ’n kreun: Gilderoy Lockhart loop tot op die verhoog. Hy is uitgevat in ’n diep pruimkleurige kleed en vergesel van niemand anders as Snerp in sy gewone swart een nie.

Lockhart waai ’n arm vir stilte en roep uit, “Kom nader, kom nader! Kan almal my sien? Kan almal hoor? Uitstekend!

“Nou, dis met professor Dompeldorius se toestemming dat ek hierdie tweegevegklub begin, om julle op te lei ingeval dit ooit nodig mag wees om juis te verdedig, soos ek al by etlike geleenthede moes doen — vir meer besonderhede verwys ek julle na my gepubliseerde werke.

“Laat ek my assistent, professor Snerp, aan julle voorstel.” Lockhart flits ’n breë glimlag. “Hy het vir my gesê dat hy ’n klein bietjie kennis van die onderwerp het en het ingestem om my te help met ’n kort demonstrasie voor ons begin. Nou, ek wil nie hê enige van julle jongmense moet julle ontstel nie — julle sal nog ’n Meester in Towerdrankies hê na ek met hom klaar is, moenie bang wees nie!”

“Sal dit nie wonderlik wees as hulle met mekaar klaarspeel nie,” brom Ron in Harry se oor.

Snerp se bolip krul. Harry wonder hoe Lockhart nog kan glimlag; as Snerp so na hom moet kyk, hardloop hy so vinnig as wat hy kan in die teenoorgestelde rigting.

Lockhart en Snerp draai na mekaar en buig; ten minste, Lockhart buig, met baie draaibeweginkies van sy hande, terwyl Snerp net sy kop geïrriteerd knik. Toe lig hulle hul towerstawwe en hou dit soos swaarde voor hulle.

“Soos julle kan sien, hou ons ons towerstawwe in die aanvaarde aan-

valsposisie,” verduidelik Lockhart aan die stil skare. “Op die telling van drie sê ons die eerste towerspreuke. Natuurlik sal nie een van ons probeer om die ander een dood te maak nie.”

“Ek wonder,” mompel Harry, terwyl hy na Snerp se ontblote tande kyk. “Een – twee – drie –”

Albei van hulle swaai hul towerstawe op en oor hul skouers. Snerp skree: “*Expelliarmus!*” Daar is ’n verblindende rooi lig en Lockhart word van sy voete geblaas: hy vlieg agteruit van die verhoog af, tref die muur, gly af en slaan oopgespalk op die vloer neer.

Malfoy en van die ander Slibberins juig. Hermien trippel op haar tone rond. “Dink julle hy lewe nog?” vra sy in ’n hoë stemmetjie deur haar vingers.

“Wat traak dit ons?” sê Harry en Ron tegelyk.

Lockhart kom onvas orent. Sy hoed het afgeval en sy krullerige hare staan penorent.

“Wel, daar het julle dit!” Hy strompel na die verhoog. “Dit was ’n Ontwapeningspreuk – soos julle kan sien, het ek my towerstaf verloor – a, dankie, mej. Braun. Ja, ’n uitstekende idee om dit vir hulle te wys, professor Snerp, maar as u nie omgee dat ek dit noem nie, dit was baie duidelik dat u van plan was om dit te doen. As ek u wou keer, sou dit werklik maklik gewees het. Ek het egter gereken dat dit leersaam sou wees om hulle dit te laat sien . . .”

Snerp lyk of hy moord kan pleeg. Lockhart moet dit gemerk het, want hy sê vinnig, “Genoeg demonstrasies! Ek sal afkorn en julle in pare verdeel. Professor Snerp, as u my kan help . . .”

Hulle beweeg deur die skare en deel almal in pare in. Lockhart sit vir Neville en Justin Finch-Fletchley bymekaar, maar Snerp is eerste by Harry en Ron.

“Tyd om die droomspan op te breek,” sê hy snydend. “Weasley, gaan jy saam met Floris. Potter –”

Harry beweeg outomaties na Hermien toe.

“Ek dink nie so nie.” Snerp glimlag koud. “Mnr. Malfoy, kom hier. Kom ons kyk hoe jy en die beroemde Potter teen mekaar vaar. En jy, mej. La Grange – saam met mej. Van Helsdingen.”

Malfoy kom pronkerig nader en grynslag. Agter hom stap ’n Slibberin-meisie wat vir Harry herinner aan iets wat hy in *Huppel met Hekse* gesien het. Sy is groot en vierkantig en haar swaar onderkaak steek aggressief vorentoe uit. Hermien glimlag floutjies vir haar, maar sy glimlag nie terug nie.

“Kyk na jul maats!” roep Lockhart van die platform af, “en buig!”

Harry en Malfoy knik skaars hul koppe, en neem nie hul oë van mekaar af nie.

“Towerstawe gereed!” skree Lockhart. “Wanneer ek tot by drie getel

het, kan julle jul towerspreuke uitspreek en jul teenstander ontwapen – net ontwapen – ons wil nie ongelukke hê nie. Een – twee – drie –”

Harry swaai sy towerstaf oor sy skouer, maar Malfoy het reeds op “twee” begin: sy towerspreuk tref Harry met soveel geweld, dit voel of hy met ’n braaipan oor die kop geslaan is. Hy struikel, maar dit voel darem of alles nog werk, dus mors hy nie verder tyd nie. Hy rig sy towerstaf op Malfoy en skree, “*Rictusempra!*”

’n Straal silwer lig tref Malfoy in die maag sodat hy hygend dubbeld knak.

“*Ek het gesê slegs ontwapen!*” skree Lockhart verontrus oor die koppe van die vegtende studente, net toe Malfoy op sy knieë sak. Harry het hom met ’n Kieliespreuk getref en hy kan skaars roer so lag hy. Harry val terug, hy reken dis dalk onsportief om Malfoy te toor terwyl hy op die vloer lê, maar dit is ’n fout. Malfoy hap na asem, rig sy towerstaf op Harry se knieë en skreeu, “*Tarantallegra!*” en die volgende oomblik begin Harry se bene heeltemal buite beheer rondruk in ’n vinnige tweestapdans.

“Hou op! Hou op!” skree Lockhart, maar Snerp neem beheer oor.

“*Finite Incantatem!*” skreeu hy; Harry se voete hou op dans, Malfoy lag nie meer nie en almal kan opkyk.

’n Waas van groen rook hang oor die toneel. Sowel Neville as Justin lê hygend plat op die vloer; Ron hou ’n doodsbleek Septimus vas terwyl hy oor en oor verskoning vra oor wat sy gebreekte towerstaf gedoen het; maar Hermien en Johanna van Helsdingen beweeg nog rond: Johanna het vir Hermien in ’n kopklem beet en Hermien kerm van die pyn. Albei se towerstawwe lê vergete eenkant op die vloer. Harry spring vorentoe en pluk Johanna af. Dit is moeilik, want sy is ’n goeie ent groter as hy.

“Liewe land,” sê Lockhart toe hy deur die saal beweeg en die afloop van die tweegevegte aanskou. “Opstaan, opstaan, Macmillan . . . versigtig daar, mej. Cortez . . . knyp dit hard, dit sal nou-nou ophou bloei, mnr. Duma . . .”

“Ek dink ek moet julle leer hoe om onvriendelike towerspreuke te *blokkeer*,” sê Lockhart van waar hy swetend in die middel van die saal staan. Hy loer na Snerp, wie se swart oë glinster, en kyk vinnig weg. “Kom ons vra vir vrywilligers – Loggerenberg en Finch-Fletchley, wat van julle twee?”

“’n Swak voorstel, professor Lockhart,” sê Snerp en gly nader soos ’n groot en boosaardige vlermuis. “Loggerenberg veroorsaak verwoesting met die eenvoudigste toorspreuke. Ons sal wat van Finch-Fletchley oorbly in ’n vuurhoutjiedosie siekeboeg toe kan stuur.” Neville se ronde pienk gesig word nog pienker. “Wat van Malfoy en Potter?” sê Snerp en hy glimlag skeef.

“Uitstekende voorstel!” sê Lockhart en beduie dat Harry en Malfoy na die middel van die saal moet kom terwyl die skare opsy staan om vir hulle plek te maak.

“Nou, Harry,” sê Lockhart, “wanneer Draco sy towerstaf op jou rig, blok jy dit so.”

Hy lig sy eie towerstaf, maak ’n paar ingewikkelde draaie en swaaie en laat val die staf uit sy hand. Snerp grimlag toe Lockhart dit optel en sê, “Oeps – my towerstaf is so ietwat oorgestimuleer.”

Snerp beweeg nader aan Malfoy, buk oor hom en fluister iets in sy oor. Nou grimlag Malfoy ook. Harry kyk senuagtig na Lockhart en sê, “Professor, kan u daardie blokkaffêre dalk weer vir my wys?”

“Bang?” vra Malfoy uit die hoek van sy mond, só dat Lockhart hom nie kan hoor nie.

“Vir wie nogal?” sê Harry, ook uit die hoek van sy mond.

Lockhart slaan Harry lughartig op die skouer. “Maak net soos ek gemaak het, Harry!”

“Wat? Moet ek my towerstaf laat val?”

Maar Lockhart luister nie.

“Drie – twee – een – nou!” skreeu hy.

Malfoy lig sy towerstaf en bulder, “*Serpensortia!*”

Die punt van sy towerstaf ontplof. Harry sien tot sy skok hoe ’n lang swart slang daaruit skiet, met ’n dowwe plof op die vloer tussen hulle val en homself lig, gereed om te pik. Daar is krete soos die skare vinnig terugval en die vloer ooplaat.

“Moenie roer nie, Potter,” sê Snerp luiweg. Dis duidelik dat hy hom verlekker in die gesig van Harry wat roerloos daar staan en die kwaai slang in die oë kyk. “Ek sal van hom ontslae raak . . .”

“Laat ek dit doen!” roep Lockhart uit. Hy rig sy towerstaf op die slang, daar is ’n harde knal, maar pleks dat dit verdwyn, trek die slang deur die lug en tuimel grond toe. Briesend kwaad en al sissend seil dit reg op Justin Finch-Fletchley af en lig sy bolyf sodat dit met onthlote tande gereed is om te pik.

Harry sal nooit weet hoekom hy dit gedoen het nie. Hy het nie ’n idee wat hom laat besluit het om dit te doen nie. Al wat hy weet, is dat sy bene hom vorentoe dryf, asof hy op wiele is, en dat hy soos ’n dom bobbejaan op die slang skree, “Los hom uit!” En wonder bo wonder – totaal onverklaarbaar – sak die slang grond toe, so mak soos ’n dik swart tuinslang en met sy oë op Harry. Harry voel hoe die vrees uit hom vloei. Skielik weet hy dat die slang niemand nou sal aanval nie; hoe hy dit weet, kan hy nie sê nie, hy kan dit glad nie verduidelik nie.

Met ’n breë glimlag kyk hy na Justin. Hy verwag dat Justin verlig, of verward of selfs dankbaar sal lyk – beslis nie kwaad en bang nie.

“Wat dink jy doen jy?” roep Justin uit, en voor Harry ’n woord kan sê, draai hy om en storm uit die saal.

Nou tree Snerp vorentoe. Hy waai sy towerstaf en die slang verdwyn in ’n wolkie swart rook. Ook Snerp kyk op ’n baie vreemde manier na

Harry: 'n sluwe en berekende kyk waarvan Harry net mooi niks hou nie. Hy is vaagweg bewus van 'n onheilspellende gebrom in die saal. Toe voel hy hoe iemand aan die agterkant van sy kleed pluk.

"Komaan," sê Ron se stem in sy ore. "Ons loop – *komaan* . . ."

Ron stuur hom uit die saal, terwyl Hermien langsaan draf. Toe hulle by die deure uitstap, beweeg die mense aan weerskante weg van hulle af, asof hulle bang is dat hulle iets sal aansteek. Harry het nie 'n idee wat aan die gang is nie en nóg Ron, nóg Hermien verduidelik enigiets tot hulle hom die hele ent pad tot in die Griffindor-geselskamer gesleep het. Toe stamp Ron vir Harry in 'n leunstoel en sê, "Jy's 'n Parselmond, hoekom het jy nie vir ons gesê nie?"

"Ek's 'n wat?" sê Harry.

"'n Parselmond!" sê Ron. "Jy kan met slange praat!"

"Ek weet," sê Harry. "Ek bedoel, dis nog net die tweede keer dat ek dit doen. Ek het eenkeer per ongeluk 'n boakonstriktor op my neef Dudley gesit, by die dieretuin, lank gelede – dis 'n lang storie – maar hy het vir my gesê hy was nog nooit in Brasilië nie en ek het hom soort van vrygelaat sonder dat ek dit regtig bedoel het. Dis voor ek geweet het dat ek 'n towenaar is . . ."

"'n Boakonstriktor het vir jou vertel dat hy nog nooit in Brasilië was nie?" herhaal Ron floutjies.

"So?" sê Harry. "Ek wed tonne van hierdie mense kan dit doen."

"O nee, hulle kan nie," sê Ron. "Dis nie 'n algemene talent nie. Harry, dit is ellendig."

"Wat is ellendig?" vra Harry wat nou begin kwaad word. "Wat gaan met almal aan? Luister, as ek nie vir daardie slang gesê het om nie vir Justin aan te val nie –"

"O, so dis wat jy vir hom gesê het?"

"Wat bedoel jy? Jy was daar . . . jy't my gehoor."

"Ek het jou Parseltaal hoor praat," sê Ron, "slangtaal. Jy kon enigiets gesê het. G'n wonder Justin het hom amper doodgeskrik nie, dit het geklink of jy die slang aanhits om hom te pik of iets. Dit was erg, hoor."

Harry gaap hom aan.

"Ek het 'n ander taal gepraat? Maar – ek het nie besef – hoe kan ek 'n ander taal praat sonder dat ek dit weet?"

Ron skud sy kop. Sowel hy as Hermien lyk of iemand so pas dood is. Harry kan glad nie verstaan wat so erg is nie.

"Sal julle my nou asseblief vertel wat verkeerd is daarmee om 'n yslike, vieslike slang te keer voor hy Justin se kop afbyt?" sê hy. "Wat maak dit saak *hoe* ek dit gedoen het? Ten minste hoef Justin nie aan die Koplose Jag deel te neem nie."

"Dit maak saak," sê Hermien uiteindelik in 'n gedempte stem. "Die gawe om met slange te praat, is juis dit waarvoor Salazar Slibberin

heroemnd was. Dis hoekom die simbool van Huis Slibberin 'n slang is, sien."

Harry se mond val oop.

"Presies," sê Ron. "En nou gaan die hele skool dink jy's sy agter-agter-agter-agterkleinseun, of iets . . ."

"Maar ek is nie," sê Harry met 'n benoude gevoel wat hy nie kan verduidelik nie.

"Dis moeilik om te bewys," sê Hermien. "Hy't omtrent eenduisend jaar gelede geleef; vir al wat ons weet, is jy dalk."

Daardie nag lê Harry ure lank wakker. Deur 'n skreef in die behangsels om sy hemelbed kyk hy hoe die sneeu verby die toringvenster grond toe val en hy wonder.

Is hy dalk 'n afstammeling van Salazar Slibberin? Hy weet niks van sy pa se familie nie. Die Dursleys het vrae oor sy towenaarfamilie ten sterkste verbied.

Harry probeer baie saggies om iets in Parseltaal te sê. Die woorde wil nie kom nie. Dit lyk of hy van aangesig tot aangesig met 'n slang moet wees om dit te kan doen.

Maar ek is in *Griffindor*, dink Harry. Die Sorteelhoed sou my tog nie daarin gesit het as ek Slibberin-bloed gehad het nie . . .

"Aha," sê 'n nare klein stemmetjie in sy brein, "maar die Sorteelhoed wou jou in Slibberin sit, onthou jy dan nie?"

Harry draai om. Die volgende dag in Herbologie sal hy vir Justin gaan verduidelik dat hy die slang weggeroep, en nie aangehits het nie, wat (dink hy vererg, terwyl hy sy kussing met sy vuiste slaan) elke gek tog moet weet.

Teen die volgende môre het die sneeu wat in die nag begin val het, omgesit in 'n sneeustorm, wat so erg is dat die laaste Herbologie-klas van die kwartaal gekanselleer is: professor Spruit wil vir die alruine sokkies en serpe aantrek, 'n delikate werk wat sy vir niemand anders wil laat doen nie, veral nie nou dat dit so belangrik is dat die alruine vinnig moet groei sodat mev. Norris en Colin Creevey by hulle bewussyn gebring kan word nie.

Harry sit hom en bekommer daar langs die vuur in die Griffindor-geselskamer, terwyl Ron en Hermien hul vry periode gebruik om 'n potjie towenaarskaak te speel.

"Om vadersnaam, Harry," sê Hermien ten einde raad, net toe een van Ron se biskoppe haar ridder van sy perd geworstel en van die bord afgesleep het. "Gaan soek vir Justin as dit vir jou so belangrik is."

Harry staan op en klim deur die portretopening terwyl hy wonder waar Justin kan wees.

Die kasteel is donkerder as wat dit gewoonlik in die dag is, want daar is dik, warrelings grys sneeu voor elke venster. Harry loop bewend verby die klaskamers waar les gegee word en vang so hier en daar 'n woord van wat daar binne aangaan. Professor McGonagall skree op iemand wat, so klink dit, sy vriend in 'n stinkmuishond verander het. Harry versit hom teen die drang om te kyk wat aangaan en stap verby. Hy reken Justin kan dalk sy vry periode gebruik om werk in te haal en besluit om heel eerste in die biblioteek te gaan kyk.

'n Groepie Hoesenproesers wat Herbologie sou gehad het, sit inderdaad agter in die biblioteek, maar dit lyk nie of hulle werk nie. Van tussen die lang rye hoë boekrakke sien Harry dat hul koppe styf bymekaar is en dat hulle druk in gesprek verkeer. Hy kan nie sien of Justin daar is nie. Hy stap nader toe hulle iets sê wat hom in die Onsigbaarheidsafdeling laat stilstaan en luister.

"So dis hoekom ek vir Justin gesê het om in die slaapsaal weg te kruip," sê 'n fris seun. "Ek bedoel, as Potter hom as sy volgende slagoffer gemerk het, is dit beter as hy 'n bietjie uit die oog bly. Justin wag al dat iets moet gebeur van die keer toe hy sy mond voor Potter verbygepraat het oor sy ouers wat Moggels is. Justin het so wraggies gesê sy naam was op vir Eton! Dis nie die soort ding wat 'n mens loop en uitblaker voor Slibberin se erfgenaam nie, is dit?"

"So julle dink regtig dis Potter, Ernie?" sê 'n meisie met blonde vlegsels angstig.

"Hanna," sê die fris seun ernstig, "hy's 'n Parselmond. Almal weet dis die teken van 'n donker towenaar. Het jy al ooit van 'n ordentlike towenaar gehoor wat met slange kan praat? Hulle het vir Slibberin slangtong genoem."

'n Gebrom van stemme volg hierop en Ernie gaan voort, "Onthou wat op die muur gestaan het? *Vyande van die Erfgenaam, pasop*. Potter het die een of ander stel met Fillis afgetrap. Die volgende ding wat ons hoor, is dat Fillis se kat aangeval is. Daardie eerstejaartjie, Creevey, het Potter kwaad gemaak daar by die Kwiddiekwedstryd, hy't foto's van hom geneem toe hy op die grond gelê het. Volgende ding wat ons hoor – Creevey is aangeval."

"Hy't nog altyd so gaaf gelyk," sê Hanna onseker, "en, wel, dit was immers hy wat vir Jy-weet-Wie laat verdwyn het. Hy kan nie heeltemal sleg wees nie, kan hy?"

Ernie laat sy stem geheimsinnig sak, die Hoesenproesers se koppe beweeg nader aan mekaar en Harry kruip nader om te hoor wat Ernie te sê het.

"Niemand weet hoe hy daardie aanval deur Jy-Weet-Wie oorleef het nie. Ek bedoel, hy was net 'n baba toe dit gebeur het. Hy moes aan stukies geblaas gewees het. Net 'n baie magtige Donker Towenaar kan so 'n

vloek oorleef.” Sy stem sak tot ’n blote fluistering en hy sê, “Dis waarskynlik hoekom Jy-Weet-Wie hom in die eerste plek wou doodmaak. Wou nie hê daar moet nog ’n Donker Heer wees wat met hom *kompeteer* nie. Ek wonder watter ander magte Potter nog alles wegsteek?”

Harry kan meer as dit nie hanteer nie. Hy maak sy keel hard skoon en stap uit van tussen die boekrakke. As hy nie so kwaad was nie, was die toneel voor hom dalk snaaks: al die Hoesenproesers lyk of hulle Versteen is toe hulle sien wie dit is, en die kleur vloei uit Ernie se gesig.

“Hallo,” sê Harry. “Ek soek vir Justin Finch-Fletchley.”

Dis duidelik dat die Hoesenproesers se ergste vrese waar geword het. Benoud staar hulle na Ernie.

“Wat wil jy met hom maak?” sê Ernie in ’n bewerige stem.

“Ek wil vir hom sê wat regtig gebeur het met daardie slang by die Tweegevegklub,” sê Harry.

Ernie byt op sy wit lippe, trek sy asem diep in en sê, “Ons was daar. Ons het gesien wat gebeur het.”

“Dan het julle ook gesien dat die slang padgegee het toe ek met hom gepraat het,” sê Harry.

“Al wat ek gesien het,” sê Ernie koppig, hoewel hy bewe terwyl hy praat, “was dat jy iets in Parseltong gesê het en dat jy die slang na Justin toe gejaag het.”

“Ek het die slang nie na hom toe gejaag nie,” sê Harry en sy stem skud van woede. “Ek het nie eens aan hom *geraak* nie!”

“Dit was so amper,” sê Ernie. “En voor jy dalk idees begin kry,” voeg hy haastig by, “moet ek net sê dat ’n mens my familie oor nege geslagte van hekse en towenaars kan naspur en my bloed is so suiwer soos enigiemand anders s’n, dus –”

“Ek gee nie om watter soort bloed jy het nie!” sê Harry vererg. “En hoekom sal ek nogal iets wil doen aan mense wie se ouers Moggels is?”

“Ek het gehoor jy haat daardie Moggels by wie jy bly,” sê Ernie vinnig.

“Dis onmoontlik om saam met die Dursleys te woon en hulle nie te haat nie,” sê Harry. “Ek sal jou dit graag sien doen.”

Hy draai om en storm uit die biblioteek, sodat Madame Pince, wat besig is om die goue oortreksel van ’n groot towerboek blink te vryf, hom kwaai agterna kyk.

Harry strompel op in die gang, hy kyk skaars waarheen hy gaan, so kwaad is hy. Die gevolg is dat hy in iets groots en solieds vasloop, sodat hy agteroor op die vloer val.

“O, hallo, Hagrid,” sê Harry toe hy opkyk.

Hagrid se gesig is heeltemal versteek agter ’n wollerige, sneeubedekte balaklawamus, maar dit kan niemand anders as hy wees nie, want hy staan die hele gang vol. Hy dra sy molveljas en ’n dooie hoenderhaan swaai aan een van sy enorme hande.

“Alles reg, Harry?” sê hy en stoot die balaklawe op sodat hy kan praat. “Hoekom is jy nie in die klas nie?”

“Gekanselleer,” sê Harry terwyl hy opstaan. “Wat maak jy hier?” Hagrid hou die slap hoenderhaan in die lug.

“Tweede een hierdie kwartaal,” verduidelik hy. “Dis óf jakkalse óf ’n Bloedsuiende Weerwolf en ek het die skoolhoof se toestemming nodig om ’n towersirkel om die hoenderhok te mag plaas.”

Hy tuur stip na Harry van onder sy dik, sneeubespikkelde wenkbroue.

“Is jy seker alles is reg? Jy lyk omgekrap.”

Harry kan homself nie sover bring om te herhaal wat Ernie en die res van die Hoesenproesers oor hom gesê het nie.

“Dis niks nie, wat,” sê hy. “Ek moet weg wees, Hagrid, dis amper tyd vir Transfigurasië en ek moet nog my boeke gaan haal.”

Toe hy wegstap, is sy gemoed nog vol oor wat Ernie van hom gesê het.

“Justin wag al dat iets moet gebeur van die keer toe hy sy mond voor Potter verbygepraat en gesê het dat sy ouers Moggels is . . .”

Harry stap by die trappe op en draai af in ’n gang wat besonder donker is; die fakkels is uitgeblaas deur ’n ysige sterk wind wat deur ’n los vensterruit gefluit het. Hy is halfpad af in die gang toe hy oor iets wat op die vloer lê, struikel, en hande-viervoet neerslaan.

Hy trek sy oë op skrefies om te sien wat dit is, en dis of sy maag verdwyn.

Justin Finch-Fletchley lê op die grond, styf en koud, met ’n uitdrukking van skok gevries op sy gesig, en oë wat onsiende na die plafon staar. Maar dit is nie al nie. Langs hom lê nog ’n figuur, en dis die vreemdste gesig wat Harry nog gesien het.

Dit is Nick-amper-sonder-kop. Hy is nie meer pêrelwit en deurskynend nie, maar swart en rokerig en hy sweef roerloos en horisontaal net mooi tien sentimeter bo die vloer. Sy kop is halfaf en op sy gesig is ’n uitdrukking van skok, presies soos Justin s’n.

Harry steier orent, sy asem kom vlak en vinnig, sy hart slaan tamboer teen sy ribbes. Hy kyk wildweg op en af in die verlate gang en sien ’n ry spinnekoppe wat so vinnig as wat hul bene hul kan dra, van die liggame af wegskarrel. Die enigste ander geluid is die gedempte stemme van die onderwysers in die klasse aan weerskante van die gang.

Harry kan weghardloop, en niemand sal ooit weet dat hy daar was nie. Maar hy kan hulle tog nie net so laat lê nie . . . hy moet gaan hulp soek. Sal enigiemand glo dat hy niks met dit alles te doen gehad het nie?

Terwyl hy paniekbevange daar staan, gaan ’n deur langs hom met ’n harde slag oop. Nurks die poltergeist skiet uit.

“O, ons eie klein Pottertjie!” kekkel Nurks en hy stamp Harry se bril skeef op sy neus toe hy verby hom spring. “Wat maak jy, Potter? Waarom sluip jy hier –”

Nurks steek vas in die middel van 'n bollemakiesie in die lug. Terwyl hy kop onderstebo hang, sien hy vir Justin en Nick-amper-sonder-kop. Hy wip om, trek sy longe vol lug en voor Harry iets kan doen om hom te keer, skreeu hy, "AANVAL! AANVAL! NOG 'N AANVAL! GEEN LEWENDE MENS OF SPOOK IS VEILIG NIE! HARDLOOP VIR JUL LEWE! AAAAANVAL!"

Doef – doef – doef: die deur vlieg oop en mense storm tot in die gang. Vir 'n paar lang minute heers daar soveel chaos dat Justin amper platgetrap word en mense hou aan om reg binne-in Nick-amper-sonder-kop te staan. Harry word teen die muur vasgedruk terwyl die onderwysers om stilte roep. Professor McGonagall kom aangehardloop, gevolg deur haar eie klas, onder andere een student met swart-en-wit gestreepte hare. Sy gebruik haar towerstaf om 'n harde knal te maak, wat almal dadelik laat stil word. Toe jaag sy almal terug na hul klasse. Die toneel is skaars ont-ruim, of Ernie, die Hoesenproeser, verskyn hygend op die toneel.

"Op heterdaad betrap!" gil Ernie. Sy gesig is spierwit en 'n vinger wys dramaties na Harry.

"Dis genoeg, Macmillan!" sê professor McGonagall kwaai.

Nurks dobber nog bo hul koppe rond, hy grinnik onderduims terwyl hy na die toneel kyk; Nurks is dol op chaos. Terwyl die onderwysers oor Justin en Nick-amper-sonder-kop buk om hulle te ondersoek, begin Nurks luidkeels sing:

"O, Potter, jou otter, o, wat het jy gemaak,

Jy moor onder die studente, sommer vir die snaaks –"

"Dis genoeg, Nurks!" blaf professor McGonagall en Nurks retireer vin-nig, terwyl hy vir Harry tong uitsteek.

Professor Flickerpitt en professor Sinistra van die Astronomie-departe-ment dra vir Justin siekeboeg toe, maar niemand weet eintlik wat om met Nick-amper-sonder-kop te maak nie. Op die ou end toor professor Mc-Gonagall 'n groot waaier van nêrens en gee dit vir Ernie met die opdrag dat hy vir Nick-amper-sonder-kop teen die trappe op moet waai. Dit doen Ernie, en hy laat Nick soos 'n groot swart sweeftuig tot bo warrel. Nou bly net Harry en professor McGonagall oor.

"Hiernatoe, Potter," sê sy.

"Professor," sê Harry dadelik, "ek sweer ek het nie –"

"Dis nie in my hande nie, Potter," sê professor McGonagall kortaf.

Hulle stap in stilte om die hoek en sy gaan staan voor 'n besonder groot en lelike drakekop van klip.

"Suurlemoensorbet," sê sy. Dit is duidelik 'n wagwoord, want die drakekop word plotseling lewend en wip eenkant toe, terwyl die muur agter hom in twee verdeel. Hoewel hy tot die dood toe bang is oor wat op hom wag, is Harry tog heeltemal verstom. Agter die muur is 'n wen-teltrap wat soos 'n roltrap gladweg boontoe beweeg. Toe hy en professor

McGonagall daarop klim, hoor Harry hoe die muur agter hulle met 'n slag toeskuif. Hulle styg in sirkels na bo, hoër en hoër, tot Harry uiteindelik, effens dronk in die kop, 'n glimmende eikehoutdeur voor hom sien en 'n koperklopper in die vorm van 'n griffioen.

Harry weet dadelik waar hy is. Dit moet wees waar Dompeldorius woon.

CHAPTER TWELVE



THE POLYJUICE POTION

They stepped off the stone staircase at the top, and Professor McGonagall rapped on the door. It opened silently and they entered. Professor McGonagall told Harry to wait and left him there, alone.

Harry looked around. One thing was certain: of all the teachers' offices Harry had visited so far this year, Dumbledore's was by far the most interesting. If he hadn't been scared out of his wits that he was about to be thrown out of school, he would have been very pleased to have a chance to look around it.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindle-

legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat — the *Sorting Hat*.

Harry hesitated. He cast a wary eye around the sleeping witches and wizards on the walls. Surely it couldn't hurt if he took the hat down and tried it on again? Just to see . . . just to make sure it *had* put him in the right House —

He walked quietly around the desk, lifted the hat from its shelf, and lowered it slowly onto his head. It was much too large and slipped down over his eyes, just as it had done the last time he'd put it on. Harry stared at the black inside of the hat, waiting. Then a small voice said in his ear, "Bee in your bonnet, Harry Potter?"

"Er, yes," Harry muttered. "Er — sorry to bother you — I wanted to ask —"

"You've been wondering whether I put you in the right House," said the hat smartly. "Yes . . . you were particularly difficult to place. But I stand by what I said before" — Harry's heart leapt — "you *would* have done well in Slytherin —"

Harry's stomach plummeted. He grabbed the point of the hat and pulled it off. It hung limply in his hand, grubby and faded. Harry pushed it back onto its shelf, feeling sick.

"You're wrong," he said aloud to the still and silent hat. It didn't move. Harry backed away, watching it. Then a strange, gagging noise behind him made him wheel around.

He wasn't alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the

door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, making its gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore's pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames.

Harry yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn't see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smoldering pile of ash on the floor.

The office door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very somber.

"Professor," Harry gasped. "Your bird — I couldn't do anything — he just caught fire —"

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

"About time, too," he said. "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry's face.

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him . . ."

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

"It's a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day," said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. "He's really very

handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly *faithful* pets.”

In the shock of Fawkes catching fire, Harry had forgotten what he was there for, but it all came back to him as Dumbledore settled himself in the high chair behind the desk and fixed Harry with his penetrating, light-blue stare.

Before Dumbledore could speak another word, however, the door of the office flew open with an almighty bang and Hagrid burst in, a wild look in his eyes, his balaclava perched on top of his shaggy black head and the dead rooster still swinging from his hand.

“It wasn’ Harry, Professor Dumbledore!” said Hagrid urgently. “I was talkin’ ter him *seconds* before that kid was found, he never had time, sir —”

Dumbledore tried to say something, but Hagrid went ranting on, waving the rooster around in his agitation, sending feathers everywhere.

“— it can’t’ve bin him, I’ll swear it in front o’ the Ministry o’ Magic if I have to —”

“Hagrid, I —”

“— yeh’ve got the wrong boy, sir, I *know* Harry never —”

“*Hagrid!*” said Dumbledore loudly. “I do *not* think that Harry attacked those people.”

“Oh,” said Hagrid, the rooster falling limply at his side. “Right. I’ll wait outside then, Headmaster.”

And he stomped out looking embarrassed.

“You don’t think it was me, Professor?” Harry repeated hopefully as Dumbledore brushed rooster feathers off his desk.

“No, Harry, I don’t,” said Dumbledore, though his face was somber again. “But I still want to talk to you.”

Harry waited nervously while Dumbledore considered him, the tips of his long fingers together.

“I must ask you, Harry, whether there is anything you’d like to tell me,” he said gently. “Anything at all.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He thought of Malfoy shouting, “You’ll be next, Mudbloods!” and of the Polyjuice Potion simmering away in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Then he thought of the disembodied voice he had heard twice and remembered what Ron had said: *“Hearing voices no one else can hear isn’t a good sign, even in the Wizarding world.”* He thought, too, about what everyone was saying about him, and his growing dread that he was somehow connected with Salazar Slytherin. . . .

“No,” said Harry. “There isn’t anything, Professor. . . .”

The double attack on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick turned what had hitherto been nervousness into real panic. Curiously, it was Nearly Headless Nick’s fate that seemed to worry people most. What could possibly do that to a ghost? people asked each other; what terrible power could harm someone who was already dead? There was almost a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Express so that students could go home for Christmas.

“At this rate, we’ll be the only ones left,” Ron told Harry and Hermione. “Us, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. What a jolly holiday it’s

going to be.”

Crabbe and Goyle, who always did whatever Malfoy did, had signed up to stay over the holidays, too. But Harry was glad that most people were leaving. He was tired of people skirting around him in the corridors, as though he were about to sprout fangs or spit poison; tired of all the muttering, pointing, and hissing as he passed.

Fred and George, however, found all this very funny. They went out of their way to march ahead of Harry down the corridors, shouting, “Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil wizard coming through. . . .”

Percy was deeply disapproving of this behavior.

“It is *not* a laughing matter,” he said coldly.

“Oh, get out of the way, Percy,” said Fred. “Harry’s in a hurry.”

“Yeah, he’s off to the Chamber of Secrets for a cup of tea with his fanged servant,” said George, chortling.

Ginny didn’t find it amusing either.

“Oh, *don’t*,” she wailed every time Fred asked Harry loudly who he was planning to attack next, or when George pretended to ward Harry off with a large clove of garlic when they met.

Harry didn’t mind; it made him feel better that Fred and George, at least, thought the idea of his being Slytherin’s heir was quite ludicrous. But their antics seemed to be aggravating Draco Malfoy, who looked increasingly sour each time he saw them at it.

“It’s because he’s *bursting* to say it’s really him,” said Ron knowingly. “You know how he hates anyone beating him at anything, and you’re getting all the credit for his dirty work.”

“Not for long,” said Hermione in a satisfied tone. “The Polyjuice

Potion's nearly ready. We'll be getting the truth out of him any day now."

At last the term ended, and a silence deep as the snow on the grounds descended on the castle. Harry found it peaceful, rather than gloomy, and enjoyed the fact that he, Hermione, and the Weasleys had the run of Gryffindor Tower, which meant they could play Exploding Snap loudly without bothering anyone, and practice dueling in private. Fred, George, and Ginny had chosen to stay at school rather than visit Bill in Egypt with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Percy, who disapproved of what he termed their childish behavior, didn't spend much time in the Gryffindor common room. He had already told them pompously that *he* was only staying over Christmas because it was his duty as a prefect to support the teachers during this troubled time.

Christmas morning dawned, cold and white. Harry and Ron, the only ones left in their dormitory, were woken very early by Hermione, who burst in, fully dressed and carrying presents for them both.

"Wake up," she said loudly, pulling back the curtains at the window.

"Hermione — you're not supposed to be in here —" said Ron, shielding his eyes against the light.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," said Hermione, throwing him his present. "I've been up for nearly an hour, adding more lacewings to the potion. It's ready."

Harry sat up, suddenly wide awake.

"Are you sure?"

“Positive,” said Hermione, shifting Scabbers the rat so that she could sit down on the end of Ron’s four-poster. “If we’re going to do it, I say it should be tonight.”

At that moment, Hedwig swooped into the room, carrying a very small package in her beak.

“Hello,” said Harry happily as she landed on his bed. “Are you speaking to me again?”

She nibbled his ear in an affectionate sort of way, which was a far better present than the one that she had brought him, which turned out to be from the Dursleys. They had sent Harry a toothpick and a note telling him to find out whether he’d be able to stay at Hogwarts for the summer vacation, too.

The rest of Harry’s Christmas presents were far more satisfactory. Hagrid had sent him a large tin of treacle toffee, which Harry decided to soften by the fire before eating; Ron had given him a book called *Flying with the Cannons*, a book of interesting facts about his favorite Quidditch team, and Hermione had bought him a luxury eagle-feather quill. Harry opened the last present to find a new, hand-knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a large plum cake. He read her card with a fresh surge of guilt, thinking about Mr. Weasley’s car (which hadn’t been seen since its crash with the Whomping Willow), and the bout of rule-breaking he and Ron were planning next.

No one, not even someone dreading taking Polyjuice Potion later, could fail to enjoy Christmas dinner at Hogwarts.

The Great Hall looked magnificent. Not only were there a dozen frost-covered Christmas trees and thick streamers of holly and

mistletoe crisscrossing the ceiling, but enchanted snow was falling, warm and dry, from the ceiling. Dumbledore led them in a few of his favorite carols, Hagrid booming more and more loudly with every goblet of eggnog he consumed. Percy, who hadn't noticed that Fred had bewitched his prefect badge so that it now read "Pinhead," kept asking them all what they were sniggering at. Harry didn't even care that Draco Malfoy was making loud, snide remarks about his new sweater from the Slytherin table. With a bit of luck, Malfoy would be getting his comeuppance in a few hours' time.

Harry and Ron had barely finished their third helpings of Christmas pudding when Hermione ushered them out of the hall to finalize their plans for the evening.

"We still need a bit of the people you're changing into," said Hermione matter-of-factly, as though she were sending them to the supermarket for laundry detergent. "And obviously, it'll be best if you can get something of Crabbe's and Goyle's; they're Malfoy's best friends, he'll tell them anything. And we also need to make sure the real Crabbe and Goyle can't burst in on us while we're interrogating him.

"I've got it all worked out," she went on smoothly, ignoring Harry's and Ron's stupefied faces. She held up two plump chocolate cakes. "I've filled these with a simple Sleeping Draught. All you have to do is make sure Crabbe and Goyle find them. You know how greedy they are, they're bound to eat them. Once they're asleep, pull out a few of their hairs and hide them in a broom closet."

Harry and Ron looked incredulously at each other.

"Hermione, I don't think —"

“That could go seriously wrong—”

But Hermione had a steely glint in her eye not unlike the one Professor McGonagall sometimes had.

“The potion will be useless without Crabbe’s and Goyle’s hair,” she said sternly. “You do *want* to investigate Malfoy, don’t you?”

“Oh, all right, all right,” said Harry. “But what about you? Whose hair are you ripping out?”

“I’ve already got mine!” said Hermione brightly, pulling a tiny bottle out of her pocket and showing them the single hair inside it. “Remember Millicent Bulstrode wrestling with me at the Dueling Club? She left this on my robes when she was trying to strangle me! And she’s gone home for Christmas — so I’ll just have to tell the Slytherins I’ve decided to come back.”

When Hermione had hustled off to check on the Polyjuice Potion again, Ron turned to Harry with a doom-laden expression.

“Have you ever heard of a plan where so many things could go wrong?”

But to Harry’s and Ron’s utter amazement, stage one of the operation went just as smoothly as Hermione had said. They lurked in the deserted entrance hall after Christmas tea, waiting for Crabbe and Goyle who had remained alone at the Slytherin table, shoveling down fourth helpings of trifle. Harry had perched the chocolate cakes on the end of the banisters. When they spotted Crabbe and Goyle coming out of the Great Hall, Harry and Ron hid quickly behind a suit of armor next to the front door.

“How thick can you get?” Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe

gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grinning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. Then, without the smallest change of expression, they both keeled over backward onto the floor.

By far the hardest part was hiding them in the closet across the hall. Once they were safely stowed among the buckets and mops, Harry yanked out a couple of the bristles that covered Goyle's forehead and Ron pulled out several of Crabbe's hairs. They also stole their shoes, because their own were far too small for Crabbe- and Goyle-size feet. Then, still stunned at what they had just done, they sprinted up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They could hardly see for the thick black smoke issuing from the stall in which Hermione was stirring the cauldron. Pulling their robes up over their faces, Harry and Ron knocked softly on the door.

"Hermione?"

They heard the scrape of the lock and Hermione emerged, shiny-faced and looking anxious. Behind her they heard the *gloop gloop* of the bubbling, glutinous potion. Three glass tumblers stood ready on the toilet seat.

"Did you get them?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

Harry showed her Goyle's hair.

"Good. And I sneaked these spare robes out of the laundry," Hermione said, holding up a small sack. "You'll need bigger sizes once you're Crabbe and Goyle."

The three of them stared into the cauldron. Close up, the potion looked like thick, dark mud, bubbling sluggishly.

“I’m sure I’ve done everything right,” said Hermione, nervously rereading the splotted page of *Moste Potente Potions*. “It looks like the book says it should . . . once we’ve drunk it, we’ll have exactly an hour before we change back into ourselves.”

“Now what?” Ron whispered.

“We separate it into three glasses and add the hairs.”

Hermione ladled large dollops of the potion into each of the glasses. Then, her hand trembling, she shook Millicent Bulstrode’s hair out of its bottle into the first glass.

The potion hissed loudly like a boiling kettle and frothed madly. A second later, it had turned a sick sort of yellow.

“Urgh — essence of Millicent Bulstrode,” said Ron, eyeing it with loathing. “Bet it tastes disgusting.”

“Add yours, then,” said Hermione.

Harry dropped Goyle’s hair into the middle glass and Ron put Crabbe’s into the last one. Both glasses hissed and frothed: Goyle’s turned the khaki color of a booger, Crabbe’s a dark, murky brown.

“Hang on,” said Harry as Ron and Hermione reached for their glasses. “We’d better not all drink them in here. . . . Once we turn into Crabbe and Goyle we won’t fit. And Millicent Bulstrode’s no pixie.”

“Good thinking,” said Ron, unlocking the door. “We’ll take separate stalls.”

Careful not to spill a drop of his Polyjuice Potion, Harry slipped into the middle stall.

“Ready?” he called.

“Ready,” came Ron’s and Hermione’s voices.

“One — two — three —”

Pinching his nose, Harry drank the potion down in two large gulps. It tasted like overcooked cabbage.

Immediately, his insides started writhing as though he'd just swallowed live snakes — doubled up, he wondered whether he was going to be sick — then a burning sensation spread rapidly from his stomach to the very ends of his fingers and toes — next, bringing him gasping to all fours, came a horrible melting feeling, as the skin all over his body bubbled like hot wax — and before his eyes, his hands began to grow, the fingers thickened, the nails broadened, the knuckles were bulging like bolts — his shoulders stretched painfully and a prickling on his forehead told him that hair was creeping down toward his eyebrows — his robes ripped as his chest expanded like a barrel bursting its hoops — his feet were agony in shoes four sizes too small —

As suddenly as it had started, everything stopped. Harry lay facedown on the stone-cold floor, listening to Myrtle gurgling morosely in the end toilet. With difficulty, he kicked off his shoes and stood up. So this was what it felt like, being Goyle. His large hand trembling, he pulled off his old robes, which were hanging a foot above his ankles, pulled on the spare ones, and laced up Goyle's boatlike shoes. He reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes and met only the short growth of wiry bristles, low on his forehead. Then he realized that his glasses were clouding his eyes because Goyle obviously didn't need them — he took them off and called, “Are you two okay?” Goyle's low rasp of a voice issued from his mouth.

“Yeah,” came the deep grunt of Crabbe from his right.

Harry unlocked his door and stepped in front of the cracked mirror. Goyle stared back at him out of dull, deepset eyes. Harry scratched his ear. So did Goyle.

Ron's door opened. They stared at each other. Except that he looked pale and shocked, Ron was indistinguishable from Crabbe, from the pudding-bowl haircut to the long, gorilla arms.

"This is unbelievable," said Ron, approaching the mirror and prodding Crabbe's flat nose. "*Unbelievable.*"

"We'd better get going," said Harry, loosening the watch that was cutting into Goyle's thick wrist. "We've still got to find out where the Slytherin common room is. I only hope we can find someone to follow . . ."

Ron, who had been gazing at Harry, said, "You don't know how bizarre it is to see Goyle *thinking*." He banged on Hermione's door. "C'mon, we need to go —"

A high-pitched voice answered him.

"I — I don't think I'm going to come after all. You go on without me."

"Hermione, we know Millicent Bulstrode's ugly, no one's going to know it's you —"

"No — really — I don't think I'll come. You two hurry up, you're wasting time —"

Harry looked at Ron, bewildered.

"*That* looks more like Goyle," said Ron. "That's how he looks every time a teacher asks him a question."

"Hermione, are you okay?" said Harry through the door.

"Fine — I'm fine — go on —"

Harry looked at his watch. Five of their precious sixty minutes had already passed.

“We’ll meet you back here, all right?” he said.

Harry and Ron opened the door of the bathroom carefully, checked that the coast was clear, and set off.

“Don’t swing your arms like that,” Harry muttered to Ron.

“Eh?”

“Crabbe holds them sort of stiff. . . .”

“How’s this?”

“Yeah, that’s better. . . .”

They went down the marble staircase. All they needed now was a Slytherin that they could follow to the Slytherin common room, but there was nobody around.

“Any ideas?” muttered Harry.

“The Slytherins always come up to breakfast from over there,” said Ron, nodding at the entrance to the dungeons. The words had barely left his mouth when a girl with long, curly hair emerged from the entrance.

“Excuse me,” said Ron, hurrying up to her. “We’ve forgotten the way to our common room.”

“I beg your pardon?” said the girl stiffly. “*Our* common room? *I’m* a Ravenclaw.”

She walked away, looking suspiciously back at them.

Harry and Ron hurried down the stone steps into the darkness, their footsteps echoing particularly loudly as Crabbe’s and Goyle’s huge feet hit the floor, feeling that this wasn’t going to be as easy as

they had hoped.

The labyrinthine passages were deserted. They walked deeper and deeper under the school, constantly checking their watches to see how much time they had left. After a quarter of an hour, just when they were getting desperate, they heard a sudden movement ahead.

“Ha!” said Ron excitedly. “There’s one of them now!”

The figure was emerging from a side room. As they hurried nearer, however, their hearts sank. It wasn’t a Slytherin, it was Percy.

“What’re you doing down here?” said Ron in surprise.

Percy looked affronted.

“That,” he said stiffly, “is none of your business. It’s Crabbe, isn’t it?”

“Wh — oh, yeah,” said Ron.

“Well, get off to your dormitories,” said Percy sternly. “It’s not safe to go wandering around dark corridors these days.”

“*You* are,” Ron pointed out.

“I,” said Percy, drawing himself up, “am a prefect. Nothing’s about to attack *me*.”

A voice suddenly echoed behind Harry and Ron. Draco Malfoy was strolling toward them, and for the first time in his life, Harry was pleased to see him.

“There you are,” he drawled, looking at them. “Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time? I’ve been looking for you; I want to show you something really funny.”

Malfoy glanced witheringly at Percy.

“And what’re you doing down here, Weasley?” he sneered.

Percy looked outraged.

“You want to show a bit more respect to a school prefect!” he said. “I don’t like your attitude!”

Malfoy sneered and motioned for Harry and Ron to follow him. Harry almost said something apologetic to Percy but caught himself just in time. He and Ron hurried after Malfoy, who said as they turned into the next passage, “That Peter Weasley —”

“Percy,” Ron corrected him automatically.

“Whatever,” said Malfoy. “I’ve noticed him sneaking around a lot lately. And I bet I know what he’s up to. He thinks he’s going to catch Slytherin’s heir single-handed.”

He gave a short, derisive laugh. Harry and Ron exchanged excited looks.

Malfoy paused by a stretch of bare, damp stone wall.

“What’s the new password again?” he said to Harry.

“Er —” said Harry.

“Oh, yeah — *pure-blood!*” said Malfoy, not listening, and a stone door concealed in the wall slid open. Malfoy marched through it, and Harry and Ron followed him.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling from which round, greenish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of them, and several Slytherins were silhouetted around it in high-backed chairs.

“Wait here,” said Malfoy to Harry and Ron, motioning them to a pair of empty chairs set back from the fire. “I’ll go and get it — my father’s just sent it to me —”

Wondering what Malfoy was going to show them, Harry and Ron sat down, doing their best to look at home.

Malfoy came back a minute later, holding what looked like a newspaper clipping. He thrust it under Ron's nose.

"That'll give you a laugh," he said.

Harry saw Ron's eyes widen in shock. He read the clipping quickly, gave a very forced laugh, and handed it to Harry.

It had been clipped out of the *Daily Prophet*, and it said:

INQUIRY AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, was today fined fifty Galleons for bewitching a Muggle car.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy, a governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where the enchanted car crashed earlier this year, called today for Mr. Weasley's resignation.

"Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute," Mr. Malfoy told our reporter. "He is clearly unfit to draw up our laws and his ridiculous Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately."

Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.

"Well?" said Malfoy impatiently as Harry handed the clipping back to him. "Don't you think it's funny?"

"Ha, ha," said Harry bleakly.

"Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should snap his wand

in half and go and join them,” said Malfoy scornfully. “You’d never know the Weasleys were purebloods, the way they behave.”

Ron’s — or rather, Crabbe’s — face was contorted with fury.

“What’s up with you, Crabbe?” snapped Malfoy.

“Stomachache,” Ron grunted.

“Well, go up to the hospital wing and give all those Mudbloods a kick from me,” said Malfoy, snickering. “You know, I’m surprised the *Daily Prophet* hasn’t reported all these attacks yet,” he went on thoughtfully. “I suppose Dumbledore’s trying to hush it all up. He’ll be sacked if it doesn’t stop soon. Father’s always said old Dumbledore’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent headmaster would never’ve let slime like that Creevey in.”

Malfoy started taking pictures with an imaginary camera and did a cruel but accurate impression of Colin: ““Potter, can I have your picture, Potter? Can I have your autograph? Can I lick your shoes, please, Potter?””

He dropped his hands and looked at Harry and Ron.

“What’s the *matter* with you two?”

Far too late, Harry and Ron forced themselves to laugh, but Malfoy seemed satisfied; perhaps Crabbe and Goyle were always slow on the uptake.

“Saint Potter, the Mudbloods’ friend,” said Malfoy slowly. “He’s another one with no proper wizard feeling, or he wouldn’t go around with that jumped-up Granger Mudblood. And people think *he’s* Slytherin’s heir!”

Harry and Ron waited with bated breath: Malfoy was surely

seconds away from telling them it was him — but then —

“I *wish* I knew who it *is*,” said Malfoy petulantly. “I could help them.”

Ron’s jaw dropped so that Crabbe looked even more clueless than usual. Fortunately, Malfoy didn’t notice, and Harry, thinking fast, said, “You must have some idea who’s behind it all. . . .”

“You know I haven’t, Goyle, how many times do I have to tell you?” snapped Malfoy. “And Father won’t tell me *anything* about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago, so it was before his time, but he knows all about it, and he says that it was all kept quiet and it’ll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing — last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, a Mudblood *died*. So I bet it’s a matter of time before one of them’s killed this time. . . . I hope it’s Granger,” he said with relish.

Ron was clenching Crabbe’s gigantic fists. Feeling that it would be a bit of a giveaway if Ron punched Malfoy, Harry shot him a warning look and said, “D’you know if the person who opened the Chamber last time was caught?”

“Oh, yeah . . . whoever it was was expelled,” said Malfoy. “They’re probably still in Azkaban.”

“Azkaban?” said Harry, puzzled.

“Azkaban — *the wizard prison*, Goyle,” said Malfoy, looking at him in disbelief. “Honestly, if you were any slower, you’d be going backward.”

He shifted restlessly in his chair and said, “Father says to keep my head down and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it. He says the

school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our manor last week?"

Harry tried to force Goyle's dull face into a look of concern.

"Yeah . . ." said Malfoy. "Luckily, they didn't find much. Father's got some *very* valuable Dark Arts stuff. But luckily, we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor —"

"Ho!" said Ron.

Malfoy looked at him. So did Harry. Ron blushed. Even his hair was turning red. His nose was also slowly lengthening — their hour was up, Ron was turning back into himself, and from the look of horror he was suddenly giving Harry, he must be, too.

They both jumped to their feet.

"Medicine for my stomach," Ron grunted, and without further ado they sprinted the length of the Slytherin common room, hurled themselves at the stone wall, and dashed up the passage, hoping against hope that Malfoy hadn't noticed anything. Harry could feel his feet slipping around in Goyle's huge shoes and had to hoist up his robes as he shrank; they crashed up the steps into the dark entrance hall, which was full of a muffled pounding coming from the closet where they'd locked Crabbe and Goyle. Leaving their shoes outside the closet door, they sprinted in their socks up the marble staircase toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time," Ron panted, closing the bathroom door behind them. "I know we still haven't found out who's doing the attacks, but I'm going to write to Dad tomorrow and tell him to check under the Malfoys' drawing room."

Harry checked his face in the cracked mirror. He was back to normal. He put his glasses on as Ron hammered on the door of Hermione's stall.

"Hermione, come out, we've got loads to tell you —"

"Go away!" Hermione squeaked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"What's the matter?" said Ron. "You must be back to normal by now, we are —"

But Moaning Myrtle glided suddenly through the stall door. Harry had never seen her looking so happy.

"Ooooooh, wait till you see," she said. "It's *awful* —"

They heard the lock slide back and Hermione emerged, sobbing, her robes pulled up over her head.

"What's up?" said Ron uncertainly. "Have you still got Millicent's nose or something?"

Hermione let her robes fall and Ron backed into the sink.

Her face was covered in black fur. Her eyes had turned yellow and there were long, pointed ears poking through her hair.

"It was a c-cat hair!" she howled. "M-Millicent Bulstrode m-must have a cat! And the p-potion isn't supposed to be used for animal transformations!"

"Uh-oh," said Ron.

"You'll be teased something *dreadful*," said Myrtle happily.

"It's okay, Hermione," said Harry quickly. "We'll take you up to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey never asks too many questions. . . ."

It took a long time to persuade Hermione to leave the bathroom. Moaning Myrtle sped them on their way with a hearty guffaw. “Wait till everyone finds out you’ve got a *tail!*”

Die Polisouspaljas

Aan die bopunt van die trappe klim hulle van die roltrap af en professor McGonagall klop aan die deur. Dit gaan geluidloos oop en hulle stap in. Professor McGonagall beveel Harry om te wag en los hom net daar, stoksielalleen.

Harry kyk om hom rond. Een ding is seker: van al die onderwysers in wie se kantore hy hierdie jaar al was, is Dompeldorius s'n verreweg die interessantste. As hy nie tot die dood toe bang was dat hy geskors gaan word nie, sou dit baie lekker gewees het om hier rond te kyk.

Dit is 'n groot en besonder mooi sirkelvormige vertrek, vol snaakse geluidjies. 'n Aantal vreemde, silwer instrumente wat op tafeltjies met fyn pote staan, maak woergeluide en gee klein rookdampies af. Die mure is vol portrette van ou skoolhoofde en onderwyseresse wat almal rustig in hul rame sit en snork. Daar is ook 'n enorme kloupoot-lessenaar en op 'n rak daaragter lê 'n verrinneweerde towenaarshoed – die *Sorteerhoed*.

Harry aarsel. Hy loer benoud na die slapende hekse en towenaars teen die mure. Dit kan darem seker nie kwaad doen om die hoed op te sit nie? Net om . . . net om seker te maak dit *het* hom in die regte huis gesit.

Hy stap stilletjies om die lessenaar, lig die hoed van die rak af en laat dit stadig oor sy kop sak. Dit is heeltemal te groot vir hom en dit glip oor sy oë, net soos die vorige keer toe hy dit moes opsit. Harry staar na die hoed se swart binnekant en wag. Toe hoor hy 'n klein stemmetjie in sy oor, “Pla iets jou, Harry Potter?”

“H'm, ja,” mompel Harry. “H'm, jammer om jou te pla – ek wou net weet of –”

“Jy wil weet of ek jou in die regte huis gesit het?” sê die skerpsinnige hoed. “Ja . . . jy was besonder moeilik om te plaas. Maar ek hou by wat ek gesê het –” Harry se hart spring, “– jy sou *goed* gevaar het in Slibberin.”

Harry se maag sink. Hy gryp die punt van die hoed en pluk dit af. Dit hang slap in sy hand, vuil en verbleik. Hy voel siek toe hy dit terugsit op die rak.

“Jy is verkeerd,” sê hy hardop vir die swyende hoed. Dit roer nie.

Harry tree agteruit, maar hou die hoed in die oog. 'n Vreemde, gesmoorde geluid wat van agter hom kom, laat hom vinnig omswaai.

Hy is na alles nie alleen nie. Agter die deur, op 'n goue slaapstok, sit 'n groot, verwaarloosde voël wat baie soos 'n halfgeplukte kalkoen lyk. Harry staar en die voël staar droewig terug en maak weer die gesmoorde geluid. Harry dink die voël lyk siek. Sy oë is dof en terwyl Harry na hom kyk, val nog 'n paar vere uit sy stert.

Harry dink net daaraan dat as Dompeldorius se troetelvoël moet dood gaan terwyl hy wat Harry is, alleen in die kantoor saam met die ding is – toe bars die voël in vlamme uit.

Harry gil van skok en tree wild agteruit tot hy teen die lessenaar staan. Hy kyk koorsig rond of daar dalk iewers 'n glas water is, maar hy sien niks. Die voël is nou 'n vuurbal: hy krysvir oulaas hard en die volgende oomblik lê daar net 'n smeulende hoop as op die vloer.

Die kantoor se deur gaan oop. Dompeldorius kom in. Hy lyk somber. “Professor,” sê Harry terwyl hy na asem snak, “u voël – ek kon niks doen nie – hy’t net begin brand –”

Tot Harry se verbasing glimlag Dompeldorius.

“Hoog tyd ook,” sê hy. “Dis all dae dat hy verskriklik lyk; ek het vir hom gesê hy moet 'n plan maak.”

Hy proeslag toe hy die verstomde uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien.

“Fawkes is 'n feniks, Harry. Fenikse bars in vlamme uit wanneer dit tyd is dat hulle moet doodgaan, dan word hulle weer uit die as gebore. Hou hom dop . . .”

Harry is net betyds om te sien hoe 'n klein, verrimpelde, pasgebore voëltjie sy kop uit die hoop as lig. Dit is net so lelik soos die ou voël.

“Dis 'n jammerte dat jy hom op sy Verassingsdag moes sien, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius en hy gaan sit agter sy lessenaar. “Die meeste van die tyd is hy regtig baie mooi: pragtige rooi en goue vere. Wonderbaarlike kreature, fenikse. Hulle kan geweldig swaar vragte dra, hul trane het helende magte en hulle is uiters getroue troeteldiere.”

Harry was so geskok toe Fawkes aan die brand slaan, dat hy skoon vergeet het waarom hy daar is, maar dit kom alles terug toe Dompeldorius op 'n stoel met 'n hoë rugleuning agter sy lessenaar gaan sit, en sy priemende ligblou oë op Harry rig.

Maar voor Dompeldorius nog 'n woord kan sê, vlieg die kantoor se deur met 'n geweldige slag oop en Hagrid storm in. Daar is 'n wilde blik in sy oë, sy balaklawamus sit hoog op sy woste swart hare en die dooie hoenderhaan swaai nog steeds aan sy hand.

“Dit was nie Harry nie, professor Dompeldorius!” sê Hagrid dringend. “Ek het met hom gepraat oomblikke voor daardie kind gekry is, daar was nie tyd nie, meneer . . .”

Dompeldorius probeer iets sê, maar Hagrid is onstuitbaar. Van ontstel-

tenis swaai hy die hoenderhaan deur die lug sodat 'n spul vere die wêreld vol waai.

“... dit kan nie hy gewees het nie, ek sal dit sweer voor die Ministerie van Towerkuns as ek moet...”

“Hagrid, ek –”

“... jy het die verkeerde seun, meneer, ek weet Harry sal nooit –”

“Hagrid!” sê Dompeldorius hard. “Ek dink nie dat dit Harry is wat al daardie mense aangeval het nie.”

“O,” sê Hagrid en die hoenderhaan hang slap aan sy sy. “Goed. Ek sal buite wag, professor.”

Hy lyk baie verleë toe hy uitstap.

“So u dink nie dit was ek nie, professor?” herhaal Harry hoopvol, terwyl Dompeldorius die hoendervere van sy lessenaar af borsel.

“Nee, Harry, ek dink nie so nie,” sê Dompeldorius, hoewel sy gesig weer eens somber is. “Maar ek wil nog steeds met jou praat.”

Harry wag senuagtig terwyl Dompeldorius peinsend na hom kyk, die punte van sy lang vingers teen mekaar gedruk.

“Ek moet jou vra, Harry, of daar enigiets is wat jy vir my wil vertel,” sê hy sag. “Enigiets.”

Harry weet nie wat om te sê nie. Hy dink aan Malfoy se uitroep, “Die Modderbloeders is volgende aan die beurt!” en aan die Polisouspaljas wat daar in Katryn Kermkous se badkamer prut. Toe dink hy aan die liggaamlose stem wat hy al twee keer gehoor het en hy onthou wat Ron gesê het, “Om stemme te hoor wat niemand anders kan hoor nie, is nooit 'n goeie teken nie, nie eens in die towerwêreld nie.” Hy dink ook aan wat almal oor hom sê, en aan sy groeiende vrees dat hy op die een of ander manier met Salazar Slibberin skakel...

“Nee,” sê Harry, “daar is niks nie, professor.”

Die dubbele aanval op Justin en Nick-amper-sonder-kop laat blote senuagtigheid verander in ware paniek. Vreemd genoeg is dit Nick-amper-sonder-kop se lot wat die mense die meeste ontstel. Wat kan dit aan 'n spook doen, vra almal vir mekaar; watter vreeslike mag kan soveel kwaad doen aan iemand wat reeds dood is? Daar is 'n stormloop vir plekke op die Hogwarts Express, sodat die studente huis toe kan gaan vir Kersfees.

“Teen hierdie pas gaan ons die enigstes wees wat agterbly,” sê Ron vir Harry en Hermien. “Ons, Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat. Wat 'n lekker vakansie gaan dit nie wees nie.”

Krabbe en Goliat, wat altyd net soos Malfoy maak, het ook die lys geteken om tydens die vakansie agter te bly. Harry is bly dat die meeste mense weggaan. Hy is moeg daarvoor dat mense in die gange hom probeer vermy, asof hy slagande het en gif gaan spoeg; moeg vir die ewige gemompel en gesis en vir mense wat vinger wys as hy verbystap.

Dis net Fred en George wat dink dis alles baie snaaks. Hulle marsjeer voor Harry af in die gange, terwyl hulle skree: “Gee pad vir die Erfgenaam van Slibberin, vreeslike boosaardige towenaar in aantog . . .”

Percy vind hul gedrag allesbehalwe snaaks.

“Dit is *nie* iets om mee te spot nie,” sê hy koud.

“Gee pad, Percy,” sê Fred. “Harry is haastig.”

“Ja, hy’s op pad na die Kamer van Geheimenisse vir ’n vinnige koppie tee saam met sy getande dienskneg,” sê George grinnikend.

Ginny dink glad nie dis snaaks nie.

“Moenie!” kerm sy elke keer dat Fred vir Harry luidkeels vra wie volgende aan die beurt is, of as George maak of hy vir Harry met ’n yslike huisie knoffel probeer afweer.

Harry gee glad nie om nie; dit laat hom stukke beter voel dat Fred en George ten minste dink dat die idee dat hy Slibberin se erfgenaam is, heeltemal belaglik is. Dit lyk egter of Draco Malfoy hom vir hul streke vererg, want elke keer dat hy hulle so sien aangaan, lyk hy nog suurder.

“Dis omdat hy kan *ontploff* van lus om te sê dis eintlik hy,” sê Ron veelseggend. “Jy weet tog self hoe hy dit haat as iemand hom in die skadu stel, en nou kry jy al die krediet vir sy vuilwerk.”

“Nie meer vir lank nie,” sê Hermien selfvoldaan. “Die Polisouspaljas is amper reg. Een van die dae kry ons die waarheid uit hom.”

Uiteindelik is dit die laaste dag van die kwartaal en ’n stilte so diep soos die sneeu op die grond daar buite sak uit oor die kasteel. Vir Harry is dit heerlik rustig, glad nie mistroostig nie, en dis vir hom lekker dat hy, Hermien en die Weasleys in die Griffindor-toring kan koning kraai. Hulle hou tweegevegte en speel Ontploffvreetkaart, sonder om iemand te pla. Fred, George en Ginny het verkies om by die skool te bly eerder as om saam met mnr. en mev. Weasley by Bill in Egipte te gaan kuier. Percy, wat hul kinderagtige gedrag, soos hy dit beskou glad nie goedkeur nie, is maar selde in die Griffindor-geselskamer. Hy het hulle op hoogdrawende wyse ingelig dat hy net oor Kersfees daar bly omdat dit sy plig as prefek is om die onderwysers in hierdie moeilike tye by te staan.

Kersoggend breek aan, koud en wit. Harry en Ron, die enigstes in hul slaapsaal, word vroeg wakker geraas deur Hermien wat inbars, van kop tot tone aangetrek en met presente vir hulle twee.

“Opstaan,” sê sy hard en trek die gordyne voor die vensters oop.

“Hermien – jy mag nie hier wees nie,” sê Ron, terwyl hy sy hande teen die lig voor sy oë hou.

“Geseënde Kersfees vir jou ook,” sê Hermien en gooi sy present na hom. “Ek is al langer as ’n uur op. Het nog vlieëvlerke by die paljas gaan gooi. Dis gereed.”

Harry kom orent. Hy is helder wakker.

“Is jy seker?”

“Doodseker,” sê Hermien en skuif vir Skille die rot opsy sodat sy op die kant van sy hemelbed kan sit. “As ons dit nog gaan doen, sou ek sê, vanaand is die aand.”

Op daardie oomblik vlieg Hedwig die kamer binne met ’n baie klein pakkie in haar snawel.

“Hallo,” sê Harry bly toe sy langs hom op die bed land, “praat jy darem weer met my?”

Sy knibbel op ’n liefdevolle manier aan sy oor, wat ’n baie beter present is as die een wat sy vir hom gebring het. Dis van die Dursleys. Hulle het vir Harry ’n tandestokkie gestuur en ’n briefie waarin hulle sê hy moet uitvind of hy ook tydens die somervakansie by Hogwarts kan bly.

Die res van Harry se Kersgeskenke is baie lekkerder. Hagrid het vir hom ’n groot blik vol tameletjie gestuur en Harry besluit om dit by die vuur sag te maak voor hulle dit eet; Ron gee vir hom ’n boek met die naam *Vlieg met die Kanonne*, wat vol interessante feite oor sy gunsteling-Kwiddiekspan is; en Hermien het vir hom ’n spoggerige arendveerpen gekoop. Harry maak die laaste pakkie oop en kry ’n nuwe handgebreide trui van mev. Weasley daarin, asook ’n groot tuisgebakte pruimkoek. Hy voel van voor af skuldig toe hy aan mnr. Weasley se motor dink wat sedert die botsing met die Woelige Wilg nog nie weer gesien is nie, en aan die klomp reëls wat hy en Ron nou weer gaan oortree.

Niemand, nie eens iemand wat binnekort Polisouspaljas gaan drink nie, kan anders as om Hogwarts se Kersete te geniet nie.

Die Groot Saal is treffend versier. Daar is nie net ’n dosyn sneeubedekte Kersbome en huls- en mistelranke teen die mure nie, maar betowerde sneeuvlokkies wat warm en droog is, val uit die plafon. Met Dompeldorius wat voorsing, galm hulle ’n paar van sy gunsteling-Kersliedere uit, terwyl Hagrid na elke eiermelkdrankie al harder brul. Percy, wat nie agtergekom het dat Fred sy prefekwapentjie getoor het sodat daar nou “Peslik” op staan nie, hou aan vra waarom almal giggel. Harry gee nie eens om dat Draco Malfoy luidkeels snydende aanmerkings oor sy nuwe trui vanaf die Slibberin-tafel maak nie. As hul geluk hou, kry boontjie binnekort sy loontjie.

Harry en Ron het skaars hul derde bakkies Kerspoeding opgeëet, of Hermien werskaf hulle uit die saal om hul planne vir die aand agtermekaar te kry.

“Ons moet nog ’n stukkie kry van die mense wat julle gaan word,” sê Hermien saaklik, nes of sy hulle supermark toe wil stuur om waspoeier te koop. “Dit sal die beste wees as julle iets van Krabbe of Goliat kan kry; hulle is Malfoy se beste maats, hy vertel alles vir hulle. Ons moet ook

seker maak dat die regte Krabbe en Goliat nie op ons afkom terwyl ons vir Malfoy uitvra nie.

“Ek het alles uitgewerk,” gaan sy gladweg voort, sonder om haar in die minste aan Harry en Ron se verbysterde gesigte te steur. Sy hou twee sponserige sjokoladekoekies na hulle uit. “Hierdie koekies is deurtrek met ’n eenvoudige Slaapmiddel. Al wat julle moet doen, is om seker te maak dat Krabbe en Goliat dit in die hande kry. Julle weet tog watter vrate hulle is, hulle sal dit beslis eet. Sodra hulle slaap, kan julle ’n paar hare uittrek en hulle in ’n besemkas toesluit.”

Harry en Ron gaap mekaar ongelowig aan.

“Hermien, ek dink regtig nie –”

“Dit kan lelik skeef loop –”

Daar is ’n staalharde blik in Hermien se oë, baie soos die uitdrukking wat ’n mens soms in professor McGonagall se kykers sien.

“Die paljas is niks werd as ons nie van Krabbe en Goliat se hare het nie,” sê sy kwaai. “Julle wil mos vir Malfoy uitvra, of wat?”

“Goed, goed,” sê Harry. “Maar wat van jou? Wie se hare gaan jy miskien uittrek?”

“Ek het klaar myne,” sê Hermien opgewek. Sy haal ’n klein botteltjie uit haar sak en wys na die enkele haar wat binne-in is. “Onthou julle daardie tweegeveg met Johanna van Helsdingen? Die haar was na die tyd op my kled. Dit moet uitgeval het toe sy my probeer verwurg het! En sy is huis toe vir Kersfees – so ek sal net vir die Slibberins sê ek het besluit om terug te kom.”

Toe Hermien wegdraf om net gou weer te gaan kyk hoe dit met die Polissouspaljas gaan, draai Ron na Harry. Daar is ’n onheilspellende uitdrukking op sy gesig.

“Het jy al ooit gehoor van ’n plan wat so erg kan skeef loop?”

Tot Harry en Ron se grootste verbasing verloop die eerste stadium van die plan net so glad soos Hermien voorspel het. Na die Kersete skuil hulle in die verlate ingangsportaal en wag vir Krabbe en Goliat wat alleen by die Slibberin-tafel agtergebly het en bakke vol koekstruif sit en eet. Harry het die sjokoladekoekies op die punt van die trapeleuning neergesit. Toe hulle vir Krabbe en Goliat uit die Groot Saal sien kom, glip Harry en Ron vinnig weg agter ’n wapenrusting langs die voordeur.

“Hoe dom kan ’n mens wees?” fluister Ron ekstaties toe Krabbe opgetoë na die koekies wys en hy en Goliat dit gryp. Grynslaggend druk hulle dit heel in hul groot monde. Vir ’n oomblik kou hulle smaaklik. Daar is uitdrukkings van triomf op hul gesigte. Toe, sonder om ’n spiertjie te trek, tuimel hulle agteroor en slaan neer op die grond.

Die moeilikste van alles is om die tweestuks in die besemkas aan die ander kant van die portaal te bondel. Toe hulle uiteindelik veilig tussen

die besems en moppe lê, pluk Harry 'n paar stekelrige hare uit Goliat se voorkop, en Ron ruk 'n bossie van Krabbe se hare uit. Hulle vat ook die twee se skoene, want hul eie skoene is hopeloos te klein vir Krabbe en Goliat se yslike voete. Toe, nog steeds verstom oor wat hulle gedoen het, laat vat hulle na Katryn Kernkous se badkamer.

Hulle kan skaars sien wat aangaan, soveel swart rook borrel uit die hokkie waar Hermien die hekseketel staan en roer. Hulle hou hul mantels oor hul gesigte en klop saggies aan die deur.

“Hermien?”

Hulle hoor die skraapgeluid soos die skuiwer oopgemaak word en Hermien verskyn. Haar gesig blink en sy lyk angstig. Agter haar hoor hulle 'n ghloep-ghloep-geluid soos die paljas wat so dik soos stroop is, staan en prut. Drie glasbekers staan op die toilet se sitplek.

“Het julle dit?” vra Hermien ademloos.

Harry wys Goliat se hare vir haar.

“Goed, ek het hierdie ekstra klere in die waskamer gaan haal,” sê Hermien en hou 'n sak in die lug. “Julle sal groter klere nodig hê as julle eers Krabbe en Goliat is.”

Die driestuks staar na die hekseketel. Van naby lyk die towerdrankie soos dik, donker modder wat luiweg borrel.

“Ek is seker ek het alles reg gedoen,” sê Hermien, terwyl sy senuagtig na die bladsy van *Mees Kwade Towerdranke* kyk, wat vol kolle en vlekke is. “Dit lyk net soos die boek sê dit moet . . . As ons dit eers gedrink het, het ons presies 'n uur voor ons weer terugverander.”

“Wat maak ons nou?” fluister Ron.

“Ons verdeel dit in drie glase en dan sit ons die hare in.”

Hermien skep drie groot lepels vol paljas in elke glas. Met 'n bewende hand haal sy Johanna van Helsdingen se haar uit die botteltjie en sit dit in die eerste glas.

Die towerdrankie sis en stoom soos 'n ketel wat kook en skuim vir die vale. Binne 'n oogwenk verander dit in 'n siek, geel kleur.

“Ug – essens van Johanna van Helsdingen,” sê Ron en kyk vol walging daarna. “Ek wed dit smaak aaklig.”

“Nou julle s'n,” sê Hermien.

Harry gooi Goliat se haar in die middelste glas en Ron sit Krabbe s'n in die laaste glas. Albei glase sis en skuim: Goliat s'n word 'n kakiekleur en Krabbe s'n 'n vuilerige donkerbruin.

“Wag eers,” sê Harry toe Ron en Hermien hul glase wil vat. “Ons moet dit nie almal hier binne drink nie: as ons eers Krabbe en Goliat is, sal ons nie lekker inpas nie. En Johanna van Helsdingen is ook nie juis 'n dwergie nie.”

“Goeie idee,” sê Ron terwyl hy die deur oopsluit. “Elkeen in sy eie hokkie.”

Versigtig om nie 'n druppel van die Polisouspaljas te mors nie, loop Harry na die middelste hokkie.

"Gereed?" roep hy uit.

"Gereed," kom Ron en Hermien se stemme.

"Een . . . twee . . . drie . . ."

Harry knyp sy neus toe en sluk die towerdrankie met twee groot slukke weg. Dit smaak soos papegekookte kopkool.

Harry se binnegoed begin dadelik kriewel, asof hy lewende slange ingesluk het – hy knak vooroor terwyl hy wonder of hy gaan opgooi – toe versprei 'n brandgevoel van sy maag tot aan die punte van sy vingers en tone. Die volgende oomblik spoel 'n aaklige gevoel, asof hy smelt, oor hom, sodat hy na asem snak en dubbeld vou. Dis of die vel oor sy hele liggaam soos warm was borrel, en voor sy oë begin sy hande groei, die vingers word dikker, die naels word breër en die kneukels maak knoppe soos bout. Sy skouers rek pynlik en die geprik op sy voorkop moet die hare wees wat laag oor sy voorkop begin groei; sy kleed skeur toe sy borskas soos 'n vaatjie uitswel en sy voete is pynlik seer in skoene wat vier nommers te klein vir hom is . . .

Net so onverwags as wat dit begin het, hou dit weer op. Harry lê gesig eerste op die koue klipvloer en luister hoe Katryn droewig in die verste toilet lê en gorrel. Hy skop sy skoene met moeite uit en staan op. Dis dan hoe dit voel om Goliat te wees. Met groot, bewende hande trek hy sy kleed uit, wat nou amper 'n derde meter bo sy voete hang. Toe trek hy die geleende kleed en Goliat se enorme paar skoene aan en ryg die veters op. Hy wil sy kuif uit sy oë vee, maar voel net die kort stekels wat laag op sy voorkop groei. Hy besef skielik dat sy bril sy oë wasig maak. Goliat het dit natuurlik nie nodig nie. Hy haal dit af en toe hy uitroep, "Is julle twee oukei?" kom Goliat se lae bromstem oor sy lippe.

"Ja," roggel Krabbe aan sy regterkant.

Harry sluit die deur oop en stap na die gekraakte spieël. Goliat gluur na hom met diep, dowwe oë. Harry krap sy oor. Goliat doen dit ook.

Ron se deur gaan oop. Hulle staar na mekaar. Behalwe dat hy bleek en geskok lyk, is Ron die ewebeeld van Krabbe, van sy poedingbak-haarstyl tot sy lang gorilla-arms.

"Dit is ongelooflik," sê Ron toe hy voor die spieël gaan staan en aan Krabbe se plat neus voel. "Ongelooflik."

"Ons moet gaan," sê Harry en maak sy horlosie se bandjie, wat diep in Goliat se dik pols sny, losser vas. "Ons moet nog uitvind waar Slibberin se geselskamer is. Ek hoop ons kry iemand vir wie ons kan volg . . ."

Ron wat nog die hele tyd na Harry staar, sê, "Weet jy hoe gek dit is om vir Goliat te sien *dink*." Hy hamer teen Hermien se deur. "Kom, ons moet loop . . ."

'n Hoë stemmetjie antwoord. "Ek – ek dink nie ek kom saam nie. Gaan julle maar sonder my."

"Hermien, ons weet Johanna van Helsdingen is lelik, niemand gaan tog weet dis jy nie."

"Nee – regtig – ek dink nie ek gaan kom nie. Julle twee moet opskud, julle mors tyd."

Harry kyk verdwaas na Ron.

"Nou lyk jy meer soos Goliat," sê Ron. "Dis presies hoe hy lyk elke keer dat 'n onderwyser hom iets vra."

"Hermien, is alles reg?" sê Harry voor die deur.

"Ja – doodreg . . . Toe, loop –"

Harry kyk op sy horlosie. Vyf van hul kosbare sestig minute is reeds verby.

"Ons kry jou na die tyd hier, hoor?" sê hy.

Harry en Ron stoot die badkamer se deur op 'n skrefie oop en maak eers seker dat daar niemand is wat hulle kan sien nie, voor hulle uitloop.

"Moenie jou arms so loop en swaai nie," sê Harry vir Ron.

"Hm?"

"Krabbe hou hulle altyd so half styf . . ."

"So?"

"Ja, dis beter."

Hulle stap af met die marmertappe. Al wat hulle nou kort, is 'n Slibberin vir wie hulle na die geselskamer kan volg, maar daar is niemand nie.

"Enige voorstelle?" mompel Harry.

"Die Slibberins kom altyd van daardie kant af ontbyt toe," sê Ron en wys na die ingang wat na die kerkers lei. Sy woorde is skaars koud of 'n meisie met lang krulhare kom by die ingang uitgestap.

"Jammer om te pla," sê Ron toe hy vinnig nader kom, "maar ons het vergeet hoe om by ons geselskamer te kom."

"Verskoon my," sê die meisie stywerig. "Ons geselskamer? Ek is in Raweklou."

Sy loop vinnig weg en kyk 'n slag of wat agterdogtig oor haar skouer na hulle.

Harry en Ron stap vinnig by die kliptrappe af, die donkerte in. Hul voetstappe weergalm besonder hard elke keer dat Krabbe en Goliat se yslike voete die vloer tref. Dit wil al lyk of dinge nie heeltemal so maklik gaan verloop soos hulle gehoop het nie.

Die doolhof van gange is verlate. Hulle stap al dieper onder die skool in, terwyl hulle hul horlosies dophou om te sien hoeveel tyd hulle nog het. Na 'n kwartier, net toe hulle amper raadop is, hoor hulle 'n skielike beweging voor hulle.

"Ha!" sê Ron. "Daar is een van hulle nou!"

'n Figuur verskyn uit 'n vertrek. Hulle storm opgewonde nader, maar hul harte sink tot onder in hul skoene. Dis nie 'n Slibberin nie, dis Percy.

"Wat maak jy hier?" vra Ron verbaas.

Percy lyk verontwaardig.

"Dit," sê hy stywerig, "het niks met jou te doen nie. Jy's Krabbe, nie waar nie?"

"Wa – o, ja," sê Ron vinnig.

"Wel, gaan na jul slaapsale," sê Percy streng. "Dis deesdae glad nie veilig om alleen in die donker gange rond te dwaal nie."

"Jy doen dit," herinner Ron hom.

"Ek," sê Percy en rek homself uit, "is 'n prefek. Niks gaan my aanval nie."

'n Stem weerklink skielik agter Harry en Ron. Draco Malfoy kom aangestap en vir die eerste keer in sy lewe is Harry bly om hom te sien.

"O, daar is julle," sê hy op sy dralende manier. "Sit julle nog die hele tyd daar in die Groot Saal en vreet? Ek soek julle oral, ek wil julle iets baie snaaks wys."

Malfoy gluur Percy vernietigend aan.

"Wat maak jy hier, Weasley?" vra hy snydend.

Percy lyk verontwaardig.

"Jy moet 'n bietjie meer respek aan jou prefekte betoon!" sê hy. "Ek hou niks van jou houding nie!"

Malfoy grynslag en wys dat Harry en Ron hom moet volg. Harry vra amper vir Percy om verskoning, maar keer homself net betyds. Hy en Ron haas hulle agter Malfoy aan, wat in die volgende gang sê, "Daardie Peter Weasley –"

"Percy," help Ron hom outomaties reg.

"Wat ook al," sê Malfoy. "Ek sien hom die laaste tyd baie hier rondsluip. En ek wed ek weet waarmee hy besig is. Hy dink hy gaan Slibberin se erfgenaam op sy eie vang."

Hy uiter 'n kort, minagtende laggie. Harry en Ron loer opgewonde na mekaar.

Malfoy gaan staan langs 'n kaal, klam klipmuur.

"Wat is die nuwe wagwoord nou weer?" vra hy vir Harry.

"H'm –" sê Harry.

"O, ja – volbloed!" sê Malfoy, wat nie eens luister nie, en 'n klipdeur wat in die muur versteek is, skuif oop. Malfoy marsjeer in en Harry en Ron gaan agterna.

Die Slibberin-geselskamer is 'n lang, lae ondergrondse vertrek met ruwe klipmure en 'n plafon waaraan ronde, groenerige lampe aan kettings hang. 'n Vuur knetter onder 'n sierlik gesnede kaggelrak voor hulle, en etlike Slibberins sit donker afgeteken in stoele.

"Wag hier," sê Malfoy vir Harry en Ron en wys na 'n paar leë stoele 'n

ent van die vuur af. "Ek gaan haal dit gou – my pa het dit so pas gestuur –"

Terwyl hulle wonder wat Malfoy vir hulle wil wys, gaan Harry en Ron sit. Hulle doen hul bes om te lyk of hulle tuis voel.

'n Paar minute later is Malfoy terug met iets wat soos 'n koerantknipsel lyk. Hy druk dit onder Ron se neus.

"Dit sal jou nou lekker laat lag," sê hy.

Harry sien hoe Ron se oë geskok rek. Hy lees die knipsel vinnig, lag gedwonge en gee dit vir Harry aan. Dit kom uit die *Daaglikse Profeet* en daarop staan:

ONDERSOEK BY MINISTERIE VAN TOWERKUNS

Arthur Weasley, Hoof van die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Moggelartifakte, is vandag beboet met vyftig Galjoene vir die betowering van 'n Moggelmotor.

Mnr. Lucius Malfoy, 'n bestuurslid van die Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery, waar die betowerde motor vroeër vanjaar in 'n ongeluk betrokke was, het vandag versoek dat mnr. Weasley bedank.

"Weasley het die Ministerie 'n slegte naam gegee," het mnr. Malfoy aan ons verslaggewer gesê. "Hy is duidelik nie bevoeg om ons wette op te stel nie en sy belaglike Wet op die Beskerming van Moggels moet summier geskrap word."

Mnr. Weasley was nie beskikbaar vir kommentaar nie, en sy vrou het gedreig om die gesin se monster op die verslaggewers te sit.

"Wel?" vra Malfoy ongeduldig toe Harry die knipsel vir hom teruggee. "Dink julle nie ook dis snaaks nie?"

"Ha, ha," sê Harry floutjies.

"Arthur Weasley is so mal oor Moggels, hy sal sy towerstaf in twee breek as hy maar net een kan word," sê Malfoy minagtend. "'n Mens sal nooit sê dat die Weasleys volbloed is soos hulle aangaan nie."

Ron – of liewer, Krabbe – se gesig is vertrek van woede.

"Wat gaan met jou aan, Krabbe?" snou Malfoy hom toe.

"Maagpyn," brom Ron.

"Gaan siekeboeg toe en gee al daardie Modderbloeders 'n paar skoppe van my," sê Malfoy grynsend. "Weet julle, ek is verbaas dat die *Daaglikse Profeet* nog niks oor al hierdie aanvalle gesê het nie," gaan hy peinsend voort. "Dis seker Dompeldorius wat alles probeer toesmeer. Hy sal uitgeskop word as hy nie oppas nie. My pa sê nog altyd Dompeldorius is die slegste ding wat met Hogwarts kon gebeur het. Hy's mal oor mense met Moggelouers. 'n Ordentlike skoolhoof sal skuim soos daardie Creevey nooit hier toelaat nie."

Malfoy begin met 'n denkbeeldige kamera foto's neem. Hy aap op 'n gemene maar akkurate manier vir Colin na. "Potter, kan ek jou foto neem, Potter? Kan ek jou handtekening kry? Kan ek jou skoene lek, asseblief, Potter?"

Hy laat sak sy hande en staar na Harry en Ron.

"Wat gaan aan met julle twee?"

Te laat dwing Harry en Ron hulself om te lag, maar dit lyk of Malfoy tevrede is; dalk reageer Krabbe en Goliat maar altyd so stadig.

"Sint Potter, die vriend van al die Modderbloeders," sê Malfoy stadig. "Hy's ook een van dié wat te min trots het, of hy sal hom nie met daardie opgeblase La Grange-Modderbloed ophou nie. Dan dink die mense nogal dat hy Slibberin se erfgenaam is!"

Harry en Ron wag met ingehoue asem: Malfoy gaan vir seker binne die volgende sekonde sê dat dit hy is. Maar –

"Ek *wens* ek weet wie dit is," sê Malfoy klaerig. "Ek kan hulle help."

Ron se onderkaak val so ver dat Krabbe se gesig selfs nog meer onnosel as gewoonlik lyk. Gelukkig merk Malfoy dit nie, en Harry dink vin-nig en sê, "Jy moet tog 'n idee hê wie agter alles is . . ."

"Jy weet ek het nie, Goliat, hoeveel keer moet ek dit nog vir jou sê?" jak Malfoy hom af. "En my pa wil my niks sê oor die vorige keer toe die Kamer oopgemaak is nie. Dit was nou wel vyftig jaar gelede, so dit was voor sy tyd, maar hy weet alles daarvan af, en hy sê dit is stilgehou en dit sal vreeslik verdag lyk as ek te veel weet. Maar ek weet een ding: laas toe die Kamer van Geheimenisse oopgemaak is, is 'n Modderbloed dood. So ek wed dis net 'n kwessie van tyd voor een van hulle weer doodgemaak word . . . en ek hoop dis daardie La Grange," eindig hy smaaklik.

Ron bal Krabbe se reusevuiste. Harry voel dat hul geheim op die lappe sal kom as Ron vir Malfoy moet moker en hy kyk waarskuwend na hom en sê, "Weet jy of die een wat die Kamer laas oopgemaak het, ooit gevang is?"

"O, ja . . . wie dit ook al was, is geskors," sê Malfoy. "Is seker nou nog in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" sê Harry verward.

"Azkaban – die towenaarstronk, Goliat," sê Malfoy en staar hom ongelowig aan. "So wraggies, as jy nog stadiger was, het jy agteruit geloop."

Hy skuif rusteloos in sy stoel rond en sê, "My pa sê ek moet my uit dit alles hou en die erfgenaam van Slibberin kans gee om te doen wat hy moet doen. Hy sê die skool moet gesuiwer word van al die Modderbloed-gemors en ek moet my neus daaruit hou. Dis jammer dat hy nou soveel probleme het. Julle weet mos van die klopjag wat die Ministerie van Toewerkuns verlede week op ons herehuis geloods het?"

Harry probeer Goliat se dom gesig so trek dat dit bekommerd lyk.

"Ja . . ." sê Malfoy. "Gelukkig het hulle nie veel gekry nie. My pa het

'n klomp baie waardevolle Donker Kuns-goeters. Gelukkig het ons 'n geheime kamer van ons eie onder die sitkamer se vloer –"

"Hoei!" sê Ron.

Malfoy kyk na hom. Harry ook. Ron bloos. Selfs sy hare word rooi. Sy neus is ook besig om langer te word – hul uur is verstreke. Ron is besig om terug in homself te verander en die geskokte uitdrukking op sy gesig vertel vir Harry dat dieselfde met hom aan die gebeur is.

Hulle spring orent.

"Medisyne vir my maag," steun Ron en sonder 'n verdere woord hardloop hulle dwarsoor die Slibberin-geselskamer, slinger hulself teen die klipmuur en laat vat in die gang af. Hulle kan net hoop dat Malfoy niks agtergekom het nie. Harry voel hoe sy voete rondglip in Goliat se tamaai groot skoene en hy moet sy kleed hoog lig terwyl hy krimp. Hulle storm by die trappe op en hardloop tot in die donker ingangsportaal. 'n Gesmoorde gestamp en geskop kom uit die kas waarin hulle vir Krabbe en Goliat toegesluit het. Hulle los die skoene voor die kasdeur en draf op hul kouse by die marmertappe op, tot by Katryn Kermkous se badkamer.

"Wel, dit was darem nie heeltemal 'n mors van tyd nie," hyg Ron toe hy die badkamer se deur agter hulle toegemaak het. "Ek weet ons het nou wel nie uitgevind wie vir die aanvalle verantwoordelik is nie, maar net môre skryf ek vir my pa en sê hy moet onder die Malfoys se sitkamervloer gaan kyk."

Harry bekyk sy gesig in die gekraakte spieël. Hy lyk weer soos altyd. Hy sit sy bril op net toe Ron teen Hermien se hokkie begin hamer.

"Hermien, kom uit, ons het vreeslik baie om jou te vertel –"

"Gaan weg," piep Hermien.

Harry en Ron kyk na mekaar.

"Wat gaan aan?" sê Ron. "Jy lyk nou darem seker weer soos altyd, ek weet ons lyk . . ."

Net toe glip Katryn Kermkous deur die hokkie se deur. Harry het haar nog nooit so in haar skik sien lyk nie.

"Oecccc, wag tot julle haar sien," sê sy. "Dis *afgryslik!*"

Hulle hoor hoe die slot teruggeskuif word en Hermien verskyn, al snikkend en met haar klere oor haar kop.

"Wat is dit?" sê Ron onseker. "Het jy nog Johanna se neus of iets?"

Hermien laat die kleed val en Ron steier terug tot teen die wasbak.

Haar gesig is vol swart hare. Haar oë het geel geword en lang gepunte ore steek deur haar hare.

"Dit was 'n kathaar!" kerm sy. "J-Johanna van Helsdingen m-moet 'n kat hê! En 'n mens is nie veronderstel om die paljas vir d-diere-transformasies te gebruik nie!"

"O, tjorts," sê Ron.

“Jy gaan *lekker* geterg word,” sê Katryn vrolik.

“Dis regtig nie so erg nie, Hermien,” sê Harry vinnig. “Ons vat jou gou siekeboeg toe. Madame Pomfrey vra nooit te veel vrae nie . . .”

Dit neem lank om Hermien te oorreed om die badkamer te verlaat. Toe hulle uitstap, roep Katryn Kermkous luidkeels agterna:

“Wag tot hulle jou *stert* sien!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE VERY SECRET DIARY

Hermione remained in the hospital wing for several weeks. There was a flurry of rumor about her disappearance when the rest of the school arrived back from their Christmas holidays, because of course everyone thought that she had been attacked. So many students filed past the hospital wing trying to catch a glimpse of her that Madam Pomfrey took out her curtains again and placed them around Hermione's bed, to spare her the shame of being seen with a furry face.

Harry and Ron went to visit her every evening. When the new term

started, they brought her each day's homework.

"If I'd sprouted whiskers, I'd take a break from work," said Ron, tipping a stack of books onto Hermione's bedside table one evening.

"Don't be silly, Ron, I've got to keep up," said Hermione briskly. Her spirits were greatly improved by the fact that all the hair had gone from her face and her eyes were turning slowly back to brown. "I don't suppose you've got any new leads?" she added in a whisper, so that Madam Pomfrey couldn't hear her.

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

"I was so *sure* it was Malfoy," said Ron, for about the hundredth time.

"What's that?" asked Harry, pointing to something gold sticking out from under Hermione's pillow.

"Just a get well card," said Hermione hastily, trying to poke it out of sight, but Ron was too quick for her. He pulled it out, flicked it open, and read aloud:

"To Miss Granger, wishing you a speedy recovery, from your concerned teacher, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award."

Ron looked up at Hermione, disgusted.

"You sleep with this under your *pillow*?"

But Hermione was spared answering by Madam Pomfrey sweeping over with her evening dose of medicine.

"Is Lockhart the smarmiest bloke you've ever met, or what?" Ron said to Harry as they left the infirmary and started up the stairs

toward Gryffindor Tower. Snape had given them so much homework, Harry thought he was likely to be in the sixth year before he finished it. Ron was just saying he wished he had asked Hermione how many rat tails you were supposed to add to a Hair-Raising Potion when an angry outburst from the floor above reached their ears.

“That’s Filch,” Harry muttered as they hurried up the stairs and paused, out of sight, listening hard.

“You don’t think someone else’s been attacked?” said Ron tensely.

They stood still, their heads inclined toward Filch’s voice, which sounded quite hysterical.

“— even more work for me! Mopping all night, like I haven’t got enough to do! No, this is the final straw, I’m going to Dumbledore —”

His footsteps receded along the out-of-sight corridor and they heard a distant door slam.

They poked their heads around the corner. Filch had clearly been manning his usual lookout post: They were once again on the spot where Mrs. Norris had been attacked. They saw at a glance what Filch had been shouting about. A great flood of water stretched over half the corridor, and it looked as though it was still seeping from under the door of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Now that Filch had stopped shouting, they could hear Myrtle’s wails echoing off the bathroom walls.

“Now what’s up with her?” said Ron.

“Let’s go and see,” said Harry, and holding their robes over their ankles they stepped through the great wash of water to the door bearing its OUT OF ORDER sign, ignored it as always, and entered.

Moaning Myrtle was crying, if possible, louder and harder than ever before. She seemed to be hiding down her usual toilet. It was dark in the bathroom because the candles had been extinguished in the great rush of water that had left both walls and floor soaking wet.

“What’s up, Myrtle?” said Harry.

“Who’s that?” glugged Myrtle miserably. “Come to throw something else at me?”

Harry waded across to her stall and said, “Why would I throw something at you?”

“Don’t ask me,” Myrtle shouted, emerging with a wave of yet more water, which splashed onto the already sopping floor. “Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it’s funny to throw a book at me. . . .”

“But it can’t hurt you if someone throws something at you,” said Harry, reasonably. “I mean, it’d just go right through you, wouldn’t it?”

He had said the wrong thing. Myrtle puffed herself up and shrieked, “Let’s all throw books at Myrtle, because *she* can’t feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I *don’t* think!”

“Who threw it at you, anyway?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know. . . . I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head,” said Myrtle, glaring at them. “It’s over there, it got washed out. . . .”

Harry and Ron looked under the sink where Myrtle was pointing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as

wet as everything else in the bathroom. Harry stepped forward to pick it up, but Ron suddenly flung out an arm to hold him back.

“What?” said Harry.

“Are you crazy?” said Ron. “It could be dangerous.”

“*Dangerous?*” said Harry, laughing. “Come off it, how could it be dangerous?”

“You’d be surprised,” said Ron, who was looking apprehensively at the book. “Some of the books the Ministry’s confiscated — Dad’s told me — there was one that burned your eyes out. And everyone who read *Sonnets of a Sorcerer* spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And some old witch in Bath had a book that you could *never stop reading*! You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed. And —”

“All right, I’ve got the point,” said Harry.

The little book lay on the floor, nondescript and soggy.

“Well, we won’t find out unless we look at it,” he said, and he ducked around Ron and picked it up off the floor.

Harry saw at once that it was a diary, and the faded year on the cover told him it was fifty years old. He opened it eagerly. On the first page he could just make out the name “T. M. Riddle” in smudged ink.

“Hang on,” said Ron, who had approached cautiously and was looking over Harry’s shoulder. “I know that name. . . . T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago.”

“How on earth d’you know that?” said Harry in amazement.

“Because Filch made me polish his shield about fifty times in detention,” said Ron resentfully. “That was the one I burped slugs all

over. If you'd wiped slime off a name for an hour, you'd remember it, too."

Harry peeled the wet pages apart. They were completely blank. There wasn't the faintest trace of writing on any of them, not even *Auntie Mabel's birthday*, or *dentist*, *half-past three*.

"He never wrote in it," said Harry, disappointed.

"I wonder why someone wanted to flush it away?" said Ron curiously.

Harry turned to the back cover of the book and saw the printed name of a variety store on Vauxhall Road, London.

"He must've been Muggle-born," said Harry thoughtfully. "To have bought a diary from Vauxhall Road. . . ."

"Well, it's not much use to you," said Ron. He dropped his voice. "Fifty points if you can get it through Myrtle's nose."

Harry, however, pocketed it.

Hermione left the hospital wing, de-whiskered, tail-less, and fur-free, at the beginning of February. On her first evening back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry showed her T. M. Riddle's diary and told her the story of how they had found it.

"Oooh, it might have hidden powers," said Hermione enthusiastically, taking the diary and looking at it closely.

"If it has, it's hiding them very well," said Ron. "Maybe it's shy. I don't know why you don't chuck it, Harry."

"I wish I knew why someone *did* try to chuck it," said Harry. "I wouldn't mind knowing how Riddle got an award for special services to Hogwarts either."

“Could’ve been anything,” said Ron. “Maybe he got thirty O.W.L.s or saved a teacher from the giant squid. Maybe he murdered Myrtle; that would’ve done everyone a favor. . . .”

But Harry could tell from the arrested look on Hermione’s face that she was thinking what he was thinking.

“What?” said Ron, looking from one to the other.

“Well, the Chamber of Secrets was opened fifty years ago, wasn’t it?” he said. “That’s what Malfoy said.”

“Yeah . . .” said Ron slowly.

“And *this diary* is fifty years old,” said Hermione, tapping it excitedly.

“So?”

“Oh, Ron, wake up,” snapped Hermione. “We know the person who opened the Chamber last time was expelled *fifty years ago*. We know T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school *fifty years ago*. Well, what if Riddle got his special award for *catching the Heir of Slytherin*? His diary would probably tell us everything — where the Chamber is, and how to open it, and what sort of creature lives in it — the person who’s behind the attacks this time wouldn’t want that lying around, would they?”

“That’s a *brilliant* theory, Hermione,” said Ron, “with just one tiny little flaw. *There’s nothing written in his diary.*”

But Hermione was pulling her wand out of her bag.

“It might be invisible ink!” she whispered.

She tapped the diary three times and said, “*Aparecium!*”

Nothing happened. Undaunted, Hermione shoved her hand back into her bag and pulled out what appeared to be a bright red eraser.

“It’s a Revealer, I got it in Diagon Alley,” she said.

She rubbed hard on *January first*. Nothing happened.

“I’m telling you, there’s nothing to find in there,” said Ron.

“Riddle just got a diary for Christmas and couldn’t be bothered filling it in.”

Harry couldn’t explain, even to himself, why he didn’t just throw Riddle’s diary away. The fact was that even though he *knew* the diary was blank, he kept absentmindedly picking it up and turning the pages, as though it were a story he wanted to finish. And while Harry was sure he had never heard the name T. M. Riddle before, it still seemed to mean something to him, almost as though Riddle was a friend he’d had when he was very small, and had half-forgotten. But this was absurd. He’d never had friends before Hogwarts, Dudley had made sure of that.

Nevertheless, Harry was determined to find out more about Riddle, so next day at break, he headed for the trophy room to examine Riddle’s special award, accompanied by an interested Hermione and a thoroughly unconvinced Ron, who told them he’d seen enough of the trophy room to last him a lifetime.

Riddle’s burnished gold shield was tucked away in a corner cabinet. It didn’t carry details of why it had been given to him (“Good thing, too, or it’d be even bigger and I’d still be polishing it,” said Ron). However, they did find Riddle’s name on an old Medal for Magical Merit, and on a list of old Head Boys.

“He sounds like Percy,” said Ron, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“Prefect, Head Boy . . . probably top of every class —”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” said Hermione in a slightly hurt voice.

The sun had now begun to shine weakly on Hogwarts again. Inside the castle, the mood had grown more hopeful. There had been no more attacks since those on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, and Madam Pomfrey was pleased to report that the Mandrakes were becoming moody and secretive, meaning that they were fast leaving childhood.

“The moment their acne clears up, they’ll be ready for repotting again,” Harry heard her telling Filch kindly one afternoon. “And after that, it won’t be long until we’re cutting them up and stewing them. You’ll have Mrs. Norris back in no time.”

Perhaps the Heir of Slytherin had lost his or her nerve, thought Harry. It must be getting riskier and riskier to open the Chamber of Secrets, with the school so alert and suspicious. Perhaps the monster, whatever it was, was even now settling itself down to hibernate for another fifty years. . . .

Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff didn’t take this cheerful view. He was still convinced that Harry was the guilty one, that he had “given himself away” at the Dueling Club. Peeves wasn’t helping matters; he kept popping up in the crowded corridors singing “Oh, Potter, you rotter . . .” now with a dance routine to match.

Gilderoy Lockhart seemed to think he himself had made the attacks stop. Harry overheard him telling Professor McGonagall so while the Gryffindors were lining up for Transfiguration.

“I don’t think there’ll be any more trouble, Minerva,” he said,

tapping his nose knowingly and winking. “I think the Chamber has been locked for good this time. The culprit must have known it was only a matter of time before I caught him. Rather sensible to stop now, before I came down hard on him.

“You know, what the school needs now is a morale-booster. Wash away the memories of last term! I won’t say any more just now, but I think I know just the thing. . . .”

He tapped his nose again and strode off.

Lockhart’s idea of a morale-booster became clear at breakfast time on February fourteenth. Harry hadn’t had much sleep because of a late-running Quidditch practice the night before, and he hurried down to the Great Hall, slightly late. He thought, for a moment, that he’d walked through the wrong doors.

The walls were all covered with large, lurid pink flowers. Worse still, heart-shaped confetti was falling from the pale blue ceiling. Harry went over to the Gryffindor table, where Ron was sitting looking sickened, and Hermione seemed to have been overcome with giggles.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked them, sitting down and wiping confetti off his bacon.

Ron pointed to the teachers’ table, apparently too disgusted to speak. Lockhart, wearing lurid pink robes to match the decorations, was waving for silence. The teachers on either side of him were looking stony-faced. From where he sat, Harry could see a muscle going in Professor McGonagall’s cheek. Snape looked as though someone had just fed him a large beaker of Skele-Gro.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!” Lockhart shouted. “And may I thank the

forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all — and it doesn't end here!"

Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the entrance hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs. Not just any dwarfs, however. Lockhart had them all wearing golden wings and carrying harps.

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" beamed Lockhart. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

Professor Flitwick buried his face in his hands. Snape was looking as though the first person to ask him for a Love Potion would be force-fed poison.

"Please, Hermione, tell me you weren't one of the forty-six," said Ron as they left the Great Hall for their first lesson. Hermione suddenly became very interested in searching her bag for her schedule and didn't answer.

All day long, the dwarfs kept barging into their classes to deliver valentines, to the annoyance of the teachers, and late that afternoon as the Gryffindors were walking upstairs for Charms, one of the dwarfs caught up with Harry.

"Oi, you! 'Arry Potter!" shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way to get to Harry.

Hot all over at the thought of being given a valentine in front of a line of first years, which happened to include Ginny Weasley, Harry tried to escape. The dwarf, however, cut his way through the crowd by kicking people's shins, and reached him before he'd gone two paces.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arry Potter in person," he said, twanging his harp in a threatening sort of way.

"*Not here,*" Harry hissed, trying to escape.

"*Stay still!*" grunted the dwarf, grabbing hold of Harry's bag and pulling him back.

"Let me go!" Harry snarled, tugging.

With a loud ripping noise, his bag split in two. His books, wand, parchment, and quill spilled onto the floor and his ink bottle smashed over everything.

Harry scrambled around, trying to pick it all up before the dwarf started singing, causing something of a holdup in the corridor.

"What's going on here?" came the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy. Harry started stuffing everything feverishly into his ripped bag, desperate to get away before Malfoy could hear his musical valentine.

"What's all this commotion?" said another familiar voice as Percy Weasley arrived.

Losing his head, Harry tried to make a run for it, but the dwarf seized him around the knees and brought him crashing to the floor.

"Right," he said, sitting on Harry's ankles. "Here is your singing valentine:

*His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,
His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he's really divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."*

Harry would have given all the gold in Gringotts to evaporate on the spot. Trying valiantly to laugh along with everyone else, he got up, his feet numb from the weight of the dwarf, as Percy Weasley did his best to disperse the crowd, some of whom were crying with mirth.

"Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now," he said, shooing some of the younger students away. "*And you, Malfoy —*"

Harry, glancing over, saw Malfoy stoop and snatch up something. Leering, he showed it to Crabbe and Goyle, and Harry realized that he'd got Riddle's diary.

"Give that back," said Harry quietly.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" said Malfoy, who obviously hadn't noticed the year on the cover and thought he had Harry's own diary. A hush fell over the onlookers. Ginny was staring from the diary to Harry, looking terrified.

"Hand it over, Malfoy," said Percy sternly.

"When I've had a look," said Malfoy, waving the diary tauntingly at Harry.

Percy said, "As a school prefect —" but Harry had lost his temper. He pulled out his wand and shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" and just as Snape had Disarmed Lockhart, so Malfoy found the diary shooting

out of his hand into the air. Ron, grinning broadly, caught it.

“Harry!” said Percy loudly. “No magic in the corridors. I’ll have to report this, you know!”

But Harry didn’t care, he was one-up on Malfoy, and that was worth five points from Gryffindor any day. Malfoy was looking furious, and as Ginny passed him to enter her classroom, he yelled spitefully after her, “I don’t think Potter liked your valentine much!”

Ginny covered her face with her hands and ran into class. Snarling, Ron pulled out his wand, too, but Harry pulled him away. Ron didn’t need to spend the whole of Charms belching slugs.

It wasn’t until they had reached Professor Flitwick’s class that Harry noticed something rather odd about Riddle’s diary. All his other books were drenched in scarlet ink. The diary, however, was as clean as it had been before the ink bottle had smashed all over it. He tried to point this out to Ron, but Ron was having trouble with his wand again; large purple bubbles were blossoming out of the end, and he wasn’t much interested in anything else.

Harry went to bed before anyone else in his dormitory that night. This was partly because he didn’t think he could stand Fred and George singing, “His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad” one more time, and partly because he wanted to examine Riddle’s diary again, and knew that Ron thought he was wasting his time.

Harry sat on his four-poster and flicked through the blank pages, not one of which had a trace of scarlet ink on it. Then he pulled a new bottle out of his bedside cabinet, dipped his quill into it, and dropped a blot onto the first page of the diary.

The ink shone brightly on the paper for a second and then, as though it was being sucked into the page, vanished. Excited, Harry loaded up his quill a second time and wrote, "My name is Harry Potter."

The words shone momentarily on the page and they, too, sank without trace. Then, at last, something happened.

Oozing back out of the page, in his very own ink, came words Harry had never written.

"Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?"

These words, too, faded away, but not before Harry had started to scribble back.

"Someone tried to flush it down a toilet."

He waited eagerly for Riddle's reply.

"Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read."

"What do you mean?" Harry scrawled, blotting the page in his excitement.

"I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"That's where I am now," Harry wrote quickly. "I'm at Hogwarts, and horrible stuff's been happening. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?"

His heart was hammering. Riddle's reply came quickly, his writing becoming untidier, as though he was hurrying to tell all he knew.

“Of course I know about the Chamber of Secrets. In my day, they told us it was a legend, that it did not exist. But this was a lie. In my fifth year, the Chamber was opened and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one. I caught the person who’d opened the Chamber and he was expelled. But the headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade me to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak accident. They gave me a nice, shiny, engraved trophy for my trouble and warned me to keep my mouth shut. But I knew it could happen again. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned.”

Harry nearly upset his ink bottle in his hurry to write back.

“It’s happening again now. There have been three attacks and no one seems to know who’s behind them. Who was it last time?”

“I can show you, if you like,” came Riddle’s reply. *“You don’t have to take my word for it. I can take you inside my memory of the night when I caught him.”*

Harry hesitated, his quill suspended over the diary. What did Riddle mean? How could he be taken inside somebody else’s memory? He glanced nervously at the door to the dormitory, which was growing dark. When he looked back at the diary, he saw fresh words forming.

“Let me show you.”

Harry paused for a fraction of a second and then wrote two letters.

“OK.”

The pages of the diary began to blow as though caught in a high wind, stopping halfway through the month of June. Mouth hanging

open, Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a minuscule television screen. His hands trembling slightly, he raised the book to press his eye against the little window, and before he knew what was happening, he was tilting forward; the window was widening, he felt his body leave his bed, and he was pitched headfirst through the opening in the page, into a whirl of color and shadow.

He felt his feet hit solid ground, and stood, shaking, as the blurred shapes around him came suddenly into focus.

He knew immediately where he was. This circular room with the sleeping portraits was Dumbledore's office — but it wasn't Dumbledore who was sitting behind the desk. A wizened, frail-looking wizard, bald except for a few wisps of white hair, was reading a letter by candlelight. Harry had never seen this man before.

"I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't mean to butt in —"

But the wizard didn't look up. He continued to read, frowning slightly. Harry drew nearer to his desk and stammered, "Er — I'll just go, shall I?"

Still the wizard ignored him. He didn't seem even to have heard him. Thinking that the wizard might be deaf, Harry raised his voice.

"Sorry I disturbed you. I'll go now," he half-shouted.

The wizard folded up the letter with a sigh, stood up, walked past Harry without glancing at him, and went to draw the curtains at his window.

The sky outside the window was ruby-red; it seemed to be sunset. The wizard went back to the desk, sat down, and twiddled his thumbs, watching the door.

Harry looked around the office. No Fawkes the phoenix — no whirring silver contraptions. This was Hogwarts as Riddle had known it, meaning that this unknown wizard was headmaster, not Dumbledore, and he, Harry, was little more than a phantom, completely invisible to the people of fifty years ago.

There was a knock on the office door.

“Enter,” said the old wizard in a feeble voice.

A boy of about sixteen entered, taking off his pointed hat. A silver prefect’s badge was glinting on his chest. He was much taller than Harry, but he, too, had jet-black hair.

“Ah, Riddle,” said the headmaster.

“You wanted to see me, Professor Dippet?” said Riddle. He looked nervous.

“Sit down,” said Dippet. “I’ve just been reading the letter you sent me.”

“Oh,” said Riddle. He sat down, gripping his hands together very tightly.

“My dear boy,” said Dippet kindly, “I cannot possibly let you stay at school over the summer. Surely you want to go home for the holidays?”

“No,” said Riddle at once. “I’d much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that — to that —”

“You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?” said Dippet curiously.

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle, reddening slightly.

“You are Muggle-born?”

“Half-blood, sir,” said Riddle. “Muggle father, witch mother.”

“And are both your parents — ?”

“My mother died just after I was born, sir. They told me at the orphanage she lived just long enough to name me — Tom after my father, Marvolo after my grandfather.”

Dippet clucked his tongue sympathetically.

“The thing is, Tom,” he sighed, “special arrangements might have been made for you, but in the current circumstances. . . .”

“You mean all these attacks, sir?” said Riddle, and Harry’s heart leapt, and he moved closer, scared of missing anything.

“Precisely,” said the headmaster. “My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in light of the recent tragedy . . . the death of that poor little girl. . . . You will be safer by far at your orphanage. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school. We are no nearer locating the — er — source of all this unpleasantness. . . .”

Riddle’s eyes had widened.

“Sir — if the person was caught — if it all stopped —”

“What do you mean?” said Dippet with a squeak in his voice, sitting up in his chair. “Riddle, do you mean you know something about these attacks?”

“No, sir,” said Riddle quickly.

But Harry was sure it was the same sort of “no” that he himself had given Dumbledore.

Dippet sank back, looking faintly disappointed.

“You may go, Tom. . . .”

Riddle slid off his chair and slouched out of the room. Harry followed him.

Down the moving spiral staircase they went, emerging next to the gargoyle in the darkening corridor. Riddle stopped, and so did Harry, watching him. Harry could tell that Riddle was doing some serious thinking. He was biting his lip, his forehead furrowed.

Then, as though he had suddenly reached a decision, he hurried off, Harry gliding noiselessly behind him. They didn't see another person until they reached the entrance hall, when a tall wizard with long, sweeping auburn hair and a beard called to Riddle from the marble staircase.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?"

Harry gaped at the wizard. He was none other than a fifty-years-younger Dumbledore.

"I had to see the headmaster, sir," said Riddle.

"Well, hurry off to bed," said Dumbledore, giving Riddle exactly the kind of penetrating stare Harry knew so well. "Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since . . ."

He sighed heavily, bade Riddle good night, and strode off. Riddle watched him walk out of sight and then, moving quickly, headed straight down the stone steps to the dungeons, with Harry in hot pursuit.

But to Harry's disappointment, Riddle led him not into a hidden passageway or a secret tunnel but to the very dungeon in which Harry had Potions with Snape. The torches hadn't been lit, and when Riddle pushed the door almost closed, Harry could only just see him, standing stock-still by the door, watching the passage outside.

It felt to Harry that they were there for at least an hour. All he could see was the figure of Riddle at the door, staring through the crack, waiting like a statue. And just when Harry had stopped feeling expectant and tense and started wishing he could return to the present, he heard something move beyond the door.

Someone was creeping along the passage. He heard whoever it was pass the dungeon where he and Riddle were hidden. Riddle, quiet as a shadow, edged through the door and followed, Harry tiptoeing behind him, forgetting that he couldn't be heard.

For perhaps five minutes they followed the footsteps, until Riddle stopped suddenly, his head inclined in the direction of new noises. Harry heard a door creak open, and then someone speaking in a hoarse whisper.

“C'mon . . . gotta get yeh outta here. . . . C'mon now . . . in the box . . .”

There was something familiar about that voice. . . .

Riddle suddenly jumped around the corner. Harry stepped out behind him. He could see the dark outline of a huge boy who was crouching in front of an open door, a very large box next to it.

“Evening, Rubeus,” said Riddle sharply.

The boy slammed the door shut and stood up.

“What yer doin' down here, Tom?”

Riddle stepped closer.

“It's all over,” he said. “I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop.”

“What d'yeh —”

“I don't think you meant to kill anyone. But monsters don't make

good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise and —”

“It never killed no one!” said the large boy, backing against the closed door. From behind him, Harry could hear a funny rustling and clicking.

“Come on, Rubeus,” said Riddle, moving yet closer. “The dead girl’s parents will be here tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaughtered. . . .”

“It wasn’t him!” roared the boy, his voice echoing in the dark passage. “He wouldn’t! He never!”

“Stand aside,” said Riddle, drawing out his wand.

His spell lit the corridor with a sudden flaming light. The door behind the large boy flew open with such force it knocked him into the wall opposite. And out of it came something that made Harry let out a long, piercing scream unheard by anyone —

A vast, low-slung, hairy body and a tangle of black legs; a gleam of many eyes and a pair of razor-sharp pincers — Riddle raised his wand again, but he was too late. The thing bowled him over as it scuttled away, tearing up the corridor and out of sight. Riddle scrambled to his feet, looking after it; he raised his wand, but the huge boy leapt on him, seized his wand, and threw him back down, yelling, “NOOOOOOOO!”

The scene whirled, the darkness became complete; Harry felt himself falling and, with a crash, he landed spread-eagled on his four-poster in the Gryffindor dormitory, Riddle’s diary lying open on his stomach.

Before he had had time to regain his breath, the dormitory door opened and Ron came in.

“There you are,” he said.

Harry sat up. He was sweating and shaking.

“What’s up?” said Ron, looking at him with concern.

“It was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago.”

Die Baie Geheime Dagboek

Hermien moet vir etlike weke in die siekeboeg bly. Toe die res van die skool terugkom van hul Kersvakansie af, vlieg die gerugte oor haar verdwyning behoorlik rond, want natuurlik dink almal dat sy aangeval is. So baie studente loop dus verby die saal om 'n glimp van haar te kry dat Madame Pomfrey die gordyne uithaal en om Hermien se bed sit, sodat die mense nie haar harige gesig moet sien nie.

Harry en Ron gaan elke aand kuier. Toe die kwartaal begin, bring hulle gereeld haar huiswerk vir haar.

“As ek skielik 'n snorbaard moet kry, sal ek niks werk doen nie,” sê Ron toe hy een aand 'n stapel boeke op Hermien se bedkassie neerplak.

“Moenie laf wees nie, Ron, ek moet byhou,” sê Hermien vinnig. Sy voel stukke beter nou dat daar nie meer hare op haar gesig is nie en haar oë is ook besig om stadigaan weer bruin te word. “Julle het seker nie nog leidrade nie?” vra sy in 'n fluisterstem sodat Madame Pomfrey nie moet hoor nie.

“Niks,” sê Harry grimmig.

“Ek was so seker dis Malfoy,” sê Ron vir omtrent die honderdste keer.

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry en wys na iets goude wat onder Hermien se kopkussing uitsteek.

“Net 'n beterskapskaartjie,” sê Hermien vinnig. Sy probeer dit wegsteek, maar Ron is te gou vir haar. Hy pluk dit uit, maak dit oop en lees hardop:

“Aan mej. La Grange, vir 'n spoedige herstel, van jou besorgde onderwyser, professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Orde van Merlin, derde klas, Erelid van die Donker Kunste-verdedigingsliga en wenner van Heks en Haard se Mees-Sjarmante-Glimlag-toekenning vyf keer agtereenvolgens.”

Vol afkeer staar Ron na Hermien.

“Slaap jy met die ding onder jou kussing?”

Hermien bly 'n antwoord gespaar, want Madame Pomfrey kom nader geswiep met haar dosis medisyne vir die aand.

“Is daardie Lockhart nie die grootste ou flikflooiër wat jy ken nie, hè?” sê Ron vir Harry toe hulle by die saal uitstap en die trappe na die Grifindor-toring klim. Snerp het hulle soveel huiswerk gegee dat Harry dink

hy gaan eers daarmee klaar wees wanneer hy 'n sesdejaar is. Ron is net besig om te sê hoe spyt hy is dat hy nie vir Hermien gevra het hoeveel rotsterte 'n mens in die Angswekkende Towerdrankie moet gooi nie, toe hulle 'n ergerlike uitbarsting op die verdieping net bo hul koppe hoor.

"Dis Fillis," mompel Harry toe hulle met die trappe ophardloop en buite sig om die draai gaan staan en luister.

"Dink jy nog iemand is aangeval?" sê Ron gespanne.

Hulle staan doodstil; hul koppe is gedraai in die rigting van Fillis se stem, wat taamlik historiese klink.

"... nog meer werk vir my! Mop, mop, mop die hele liewe nag, asof ek nie genoeg het om te doen nie! Nee, dis die laaste strooi, ek gaan vir Dompeldorius sien..."

Sy voetstappe word dowwer en hulle hoor hoe 'n deur in die verte toeslaan.

Hulle steek hul koppe om die hoek. Fillis het duidelik weer sy gewone uitkykpos beman: hulle is op die plek waar mev. Norris aangeval is. Hulle sien dadelik waarom Fillis so uitgevaar het. 'n Yslike poel water strek oor goed die helfte van die gang en dit lyk of nog water onderdeur Katryn Kermkous se badkamerdeur kom. Noudat Fillis ophou skel het, kan hulle hoor hoe Katryn se gekerm teen die badkammermure weergalm.

"Wat gaan nou weer met haar aan?" sê Ron.

"Kom ons gaan kyk," sê Harry. Hulle lig hul klere tot bo hul enkels en stap deur die water na die deur waarop Buite Werking staan. Soos altyd ignoreer hulle dit en stap in.

Katryn Kermkous huil, indien moontlik, nog harder as gewoonlik. Dit klink of sy in haar gewone toilet wegkruip. Dis donker in die badkamer, want die kerse is geblus deur die vloed water wat teen die mure en die vloere gespat het.

"Wat gaan aan, Katryn?" sê Harry.

"Wie's daar?" gorrel Katryn triestig. "Kom julle my met nog iets gooi?"

Harry waad tot by haar hokkie en sê, "Hoekom sal ons jou met iets wil gooi?"

"Moenie vir my vra nie," skree Katryn en maak haar verskyning sodat 'n golf water opnuut oor die sopnat vloer spat. "Hier is ek, pla niemand nie en iemand gooi my sowaar met 'n boek..."

"Maar jy kry mos nie seer as iemand jou met iets gooi nie," sê Harry redelik. "Ek bedoel, dit gaan mos net deur jou, of hoe?"

Hy het die verkeerde ding gesê. Katryn pof haar op en gil, "Kom ons almal gooi Katryn met boeke; sy kan mos nie voel nie! Tien punte as julle dit deur haar maag kan gooi! Vyftig punte vir 'n kopskoot! Ha, ha, ha! Wat 'n oulike speletjie... kamtig!"

"Wie het jou daarmee gegooi?" vra Harry.

"Ek weet nie... ek het net hier in die pyp gesit en dink oor die dood

en toe val dit deur my kop,” sê Katryn en gluur hulle aan. “Dis daar oorkant. Dit het uitgespoel.”

Harry en Ron kyk onder die wasbak na waar Katryn wys. Daar lê ’n klein, dun boekie. Dit het ’n verweerde swart omslag en is deurdrenk van die water. Harry tree nader om dit op te tel, maar Ron steek ’n hand uit om hom terug te hou.

“Wat nou weer?” sê Harry.

“Is jy mal?” sê Ron. “Dit kan gevaarlik wees.”

“Gevaarlik?” sê Harry en lag. “Komaan, hoe kan dit gevaarlik wil wees?”

“Jy sal verbaas wees,” sê Ron, wat wantrouig na die boek staar. “Party van die boeke wat die Ministerie gekonfiskeer het – my pa’t vir my gesê – daar was een wat jou oë uitbrand. En almal wat *Gedigte deur ’n Goëlaar* gelees het, het vir die res van hul lewe in limerieke gepraat. En so ’n ou heks in Bath het ’n boek gehad wat gemaak het dat jy *nooit weer* kan op-hou lees nie! Jy loop die hele tyd rond met jou neus in die boek en probeer om alles met een hand te doen. En –”

“Goed, goed, ek verstaan,” sê Harry.

Die klein boekie op die vloer lyk doodgewoon en nat.

“Wel, ons sal ook nie weet as ons nie kyk nie,” sê hy, koes om Ron en tel dit van die grond af op.

Harry sien dadelik dat dit ’n dagboek is en die verbleikte datum op die voorblad sê vir hom dat dit vyftig jaar oud is. Hy maak dit gretig oop. Op die eerste bladsy kan hy die naam “E.M. Dhoewels” in gekladde ink lees.

“Wag ’n bietjie,” sê Ron wat versigtig nader gekom het en oor Harry se skouer loer. “Ek ken daardie naam . . . E.M. Dhoewels het ’n toekenning gekry vir spesiale dienste gelewer aan die skool, vyftig jaar gelede.”

“Hoe op aarde weet jy dit?” vra Harry verbaas.

“Omdat Fillis my daardie skild omtrent vyftig keer laat opvryf het toe ek detensie moes doen,” sê Ron ergerlik. “Dis die een waaroor ek die slakke gehik het. As jy ’n uur lank slym van ’n naam moes afvee, sal jy dit ook onthou.”

Harry trek die nat blaaië van mekaar af. Hulle is heeltemal blanko. Daar is nie die geringste teken van skrif op selfs een van hulle nie, nie eens “Tant Mabel se verjaardag” of “tandarts, halfvier” nie.

“Hy’t nooit hierin geskryf nie,” sê Harry teleurgesteld.

“Ek wonder hoekom iemand dit wou wegspoel?” sê Ron nuuskierig.

Harry draai die boek om en sien dat die naam van ’n Londense boekwinkel in Vauxhallstraat agterop gedruk is.

“Sy ouers was seker Moggels,” sê Harry peinsend, “anders hoekom sou hy ’n dagboek in Vauxhallstraat gekoop het . . .”

“Wel, nou is dit niks werd nie,” sê Ron. Hy laat sak sy stem. “Vyftig punte as jy dit deur Katryn se neus kan gooi.”

Maar Harry druk dit in sy sak.

Aan die begin van Februarie verlaat Hermien die siekeboeg, sonder pels, snorbaard en stert. Op haar eerste aand terug in die Griffindor-toring wys Harry E.M. Dhoewels se dagboek vir haar en vertel haar waar hy dit gekry het.

“Oe, dalk het dit geheime magte!” Vol entoesiasme neem Hermien die dagboek en kyk aandagtig daarna.

“As dit het, is dit goed weggesteek,” sê Ron. “Miskien is dit skaam. Ek weet nie hoekom jy dit nie weggooi nie, Harry.”

“Ek wens ek weet hoekom iemand dit wel weggegooi het,” sê Harry. “Ek sal ook nie omgee om te weet hoekom Dhoewels ’n toekenning vir spesiale dienste aan Hogwarts gekry het nie.”

“Kon enigiets gedoen het,” sê Ron. “Dalk het hy dertig U.I.Le gekry of ’n onderwyser van ’n reuse-inkvis gered. Miskien is dit hy wat vir Katryn vermoor het, hy sou almal ’n guns bewys het . . .”

Maar Harry sien aan die skielike aandagtige uitdrukking op Hermien se gesig dat sy dink wat hy dink.

“Wat?” sê Ron en kyk van die een na die ander.

“Wel, die Kamer van Geheimenisse is vyftig jaar gelede oopgemaak, nie waar nie?” sê Harry. “Dis wat Malfoy gesê het.”

“Ja . . .” sê Ron stadig.

“En hierdie dagboek is vyftig jaar oud,” sê Hermien en tik-tik opgewonde daarteen.

“Dus?”

“Ron, word wakker,” raas Hermien. “Ons weet die persoon wat die Kamer vyftig jaar gelede oopgemaak het, is geskors. Ons weet dat E.M. Dhoewels vyftig jaar gelede ’n toekenning vir spesiale dienste gekry het. Wel, wat as Dhoewels hierdie spesiale toekenning gekry het omdat hy Slibberin se Erfgenaam gevang het? Sy dagboek behoort ons alles te vertel: waar die Kamer is, hoe om dit oop te maak, en watter soort gedierte daar-in woon. Die persoon wat agter die aanvalle is, sal nie wil hê dat hierdie dagboek sommer iewers rondlê nie, of hoe?”

“Dis ’n briljante teorie, Hermien,” sê Ron, “maar daar is een klein probleem. Daar is niks in hierdie dagboek geskryf nie.”

Maar Hermien haal haar towerstaf uit haar tas.

“Dalk is dit onsigbare ink!” fluister sy.

Sy tik drie keer teen die dagboek en sê ademloos, “*Aparecium!*”

Niks gebeur nie. Dit skrik Hermien egter nie af nie. Sy steek haar hand terug in haar tas en haal iets uit wat soos ’n helderrooi uitveër lyk.

“Dis ’n Inveër. Ek het dit in Diagonaalstraat gekry,” sê sy.

Sy vryf hard op die eerste Januarie. Niks gebeur nie.

“Ek sê jou daar is niks,” sê Ron. “Dhoewels het ’n dagboek vir Kersfees gekry en dit was te veel moeite om daarin te skryf.”

Harry weet regtig nie hoekom hy Dhoewels se dagboek nie sommer net weggooi nie. Hoewel hy goed weet dat die dagboek *leeg* is, tel hy dit gedurig op en blaai daardeur asof dit 'n storie is wat hy wil klaar lees. En hoewel Harry seker is dat hy die naam E.M. Dhoewels nog nooit tevore gehoor het nie, is dit al of dit iets moet beteken, asof Dhoewels 'n vriend is wat hy gehad het toe hy klein was, maar hom vergeet het. Maar dit is tog belaglik. Voor Hogwarts het hy nooit enige vriende gehad nie, daarvan het Dudley seker gemaak.

Harry is egter vasberade om meer oor Dhoewels uit te vind en net die volgende pouse gaan hy na die trofeekamer om na Dhoewels se spesiale toekenning te kyk. 'n Baie belangstellende Hermien gaan saam, asook 'n totaal onoortuigde Ron wat sê dat hy vir die res van sy lewe genoeg van die trofeekamer gehad het.

Dhoewels se blink goue skild staan eenkant in 'n hoekkas. Daar is geen besonderhede oor die rede waarom dit vir hom gegee is nie ("Ook maar goed, anders was dit groter en dan het ek dit nou nog sit en opvryf," sê Ron.) Hulle kry wel Dhoewels se naam op 'n ou Medalje vir Toormeriete en op die lys van vorige hoofseuns.

"Hy klink soos Percy." Ron trek sy neus op. "Prefek – hoofseun – seker die beste in die klas ook nog."

"Jy laat dit soos iets slegs klink," sê Hermien in 'n gekrenkte stem.

Die son het intussen weer floutjies op Hogwarts begin skyn. Binne-in die kasteel is die atmosfeer heelwat ligter. Daar was geen verdere aanvalle na dié op Justin en Nick-amper-sonder-kop nie en volgens professor Spruit is die alruine besig om geheimsinnig en buierig te word, wat beteken dat hulle vinnig grootword.

"Die oomblik dat hul aknee opklaar, kan hulle weer oorgeplant word," hoor Harry hoe sy een oggend troostend vir Fillis sê. "Daarna is dit nie lank voor ons hulle kan opsny en stowe nie. Jy sal mev. Norris een van die dae terughê by jou."

Dalk is Slibberin se Erfgenaam se moed gebreek, dink Harry. Dit moet al gevaarliker word om die Kamer van Geheimenisse oop te maak, noudat almal in die skool so agterdogtig is. Dalk is die monster, wat dit ook al mag wees, besig om reg te maak vir nog 'n vyftig jaar lange winterslaap . . .

Ernie Macmillan van Hoesenproes is egter nie so vrolik nie. Hy is nog steeds vas oortuig dat Harry die skuldige is; dat hy homself "weggegee het" by die Tweegevegklub. Nurks help ook nie: hy hou aan om skielik in die besigste gange te verskyn, terwyl hy "Potter, jou otter . . ." sing, deesdae saam met 'n paar gepaste danspassies.

Dit lyk of Gilderoy Lockhart reken dat hy, persoonlik, die aanvalle laat ophou het. Harry hoor per toeval wat hy vir professor McGonagall sê toe hulle in die rye staan om na die Transfigurasie-klas te gaan.

“Ek reken die moeilikheid is oor, Minerva,” sê hy, terwyl hy sy neus tik en beterweterig knipoog. “Ek dink die Kamer is hierdie keer vir goed gesluit. Die skuldige moet besef het dat dit net ’n kwessie van tyd is voor ek hom vang. Baie verstandig om nou op te hou, voor ek hom kan vastrek.

“Wat die skool nou nodig het, is iets wat die moreel sal ophef. Iets wat die gedagtes aan die vorige kwartaal sal uitwis. Ek wil nie uit my beurt praat nie, maar ek dink ek weet wat om te doen . . .”

Weer tik hy teen sy neus en toe stap hy aan.

Lockhart se idee van iets wat die moreel sal bevorder, word duidelik tydens ontbyt op die veertiende Februarie. Harry het die vorige nag maar min geslaap. Hulle het tot laat in die aand Kwiddiek geoefen. Toe hy hom die oggend na die Groot Saal haas, is dit effens laat. Vir ’n oomblik dink hy dat hy deur die verkeerde deure gestap het.

Die mure is oortrek met afskuwelike, groot pienk blomme. Erger, hartvormige konfetti warrel uit ’n bleekblou plafon. Harry stap na die Grifindor-tafel waar Ron sit en wag. Ron lyk naar op die maag en Hermien is giggelrig.

“Wat’s aan die gang?” vra Harry toe hy gaan sit en stukkies konfetti van sy spek afvee.

Ron beduie na die onderwysers se tafel, te vol walging om te praat. Lockhart, wat ’n skelpienk kleed dra om by die versierings te pas, wuif vir stilte. Die onderwysers aan weerskante van hom se gesigte is strak. Van waar hy sit, kan Harry ’n spiertjie in professor McGonagall se wang sien spring. Snerp lyk asof iemand so pas vir hom ’n groot beker Skele-Groei ingejaag het.

“’n Heerlike Valentynsdag vir julle almal!” skree Lockhart. “En ’n spesiale woordjie van dank aan die ses-en-veertig mense wat tot dusver vir my Valentynskaarte gestuur het! Ja, ek het myself die vrymoedigheid toegeëien om hierdie nederige verrassing vir julle te reël – en dis nog net die begin!”

Lockhart klap sy hande en ’n stuk of twaalf dwerge wat besonder nors lyk, marsjeer deur die deure wat na die ingangsportaal lei. Die dwerge is nie sommer enige hierjys nie. Hulle het goue vlerkies aan en elkeen dra ’n goue harp.

“My oulike klein kaartmannetjies en kupido’s!” sê Lockhart stralend. “Hulle sal vandag in die skool rondloop en Valentynskaarte uitdeel! En dis nie die einde van die pret nie! Ek is seker my kollegas sal hul talente met graagte met ons deel! Vra gerus vir professor Snerp om julle te wys hoe om ’n Liefdesdrankie te maak! En professor Flickerpitt, die ou skelm, weet glo meer van Bekoringstowerspreuke as enige ander toewenaar in die wêreld!”

Professor Flickerpitt laat sak sy kop op sy hande. Snerp lyk of hy die eerste persoon wat vir ’n Liefdesdrankie vra, gif sal voer.

“Asseblief, Hermien, sê tog jy was nie een van die ses-en-veertig nie,”

sê Ron toe hulle by die Groot Saal uitstap om na hul eerste klas te gaan. Hermien soek skielik vreeslik hard na haar klasrooster en antwoord hom nie.

Die hele dag lank storm die dwerge by die klaskamers in om Valentynskaarte af te lewer en haal vir hulself die gramskap van al wat onderwyser is op die hals. Laat die middag, toe die Griffindors die trappe opklim na die Towerspelklas, haal een van hulle vir Harry in.

"Hoei, jy daar, 'Arrie Potter!" skree 'n besonder iesegrimmige dwerg, wat 'n pad met sy elmboë oopstamp om by Harry te kom.

Harry is vuurrooi by die gedagte dat hy voor 'n klomp eerstejaars, wat Ginny Weasley insluit, 'n Valentynskaart gaan kry en doen sy bes om homself uit die voete te maak. Die dwerg skop egter links en regs mense se skene en dwing 'n pad oop tot by hom, voor hy 'n tree kan gee.

"Ek het 'n musikale boodskap vir 'Arrie Potter wat ek persoonlik aan hom moet gee," sê die dwerg, terwyl hy sy harp se snare dreigend pluk.

"Nie hier nie," fluister Harry dringend en probeer vlug.

"Staan still!" grom die dwerg. Hy kry Harry se tas beet en pluk hom terug.

"Los my!" snou Harry hom toe en beur weg.

Met 'n harde skeurgeluid bars die tas oop. Boeke, towerstaf, perkament en veerpen rol oor die vloer en sy inkbottel breek oor alles oop.

Harry skarrel rond in 'n poging om al sy goed op te tel voor die dwerg kan begin sing, en veroorsaak so ietwat van 'n opeenhoping in die gang.

"Wat gaan hier aan?" kom die koue, dralende stem van Draco Malfoy. Harry sukkel koorsig om al sy goed in sy geskeurde tas te prop. Hy is desperaat om weg te kom voor Malfoy sy musikale Valentynskaart hoor.

"Waaroor gaan hierdie bohaai?" sê nog 'n bekende stem toe Percy Weasley opdaag.

Nou verloor Harry heeltemal kop. Hy probeer weghardloop, maar die dwerg gryp hom om die knieë en duik hom plat.

"Daar's hy," sê hy en gaan sit op Harry se enkels, "en hier is jou singende Valentyn:

"Sy oë is groener as gepiekelde paddas,

Sy hare is swarter as steenkool.

Ek wens hy was myne; my hart is syne,

Held en Redder van ons Skool."

Harry sal al die goud in Edelgolt betaal net om te kan verdwyn. Terwyl hy orent sukkel, doen hy sy bes om saam met almal te lag. Sy voete is skoon lam van die gewig van die dwerg. Percy Weasley is besig om die skare klas toe te jaag. Sommige mense huil soos hulle lag.

"Aanstap, aanstap, die klok het al vyf minute gelede gelui, weg is julle," sê Percy en stoot van die kleiner studente uit die pad. "Jy ook, Malfoy."

Toe Harry omkyk, sien hy hoe Malfoy buk en iets optel. Met 'n skewe

grinnik wys hy dit vir Krabbe en Goliat en Harry besef dat dit Dhoewels se dagboek is.

“Gee dit terug,” sê Harry onheilspellend sag.

“Wonder wat Potter hierin geskryf het?” sê Malfoy, wat duidelik nie die datum voorop gesien het nie en dink dat dit Harry se eie dagboek is. Meteens is almal stil. Ginny staar van die dagboek na Harry en lyk tot die dood toe bang.

“Gee dit terug, Malfoy,” sê Percy streng.

“Wanneer ek klaar gekyk het,” sê Malfoy en waai die dagboek teregend voor Harry.

Percy sê nog, “As ’n prefek van hierdie skool –”, toe Harry sy humeur verloor. Hy pluk sy towerstaf uit en skreeu, “*Expelliarmus!*” en net soos Snerp vir Lockhart ontwapen het, so sien Malfoy hoe die dagboek uit sy hand vlieg en die lug in trek. Ron glimlag breed toe hy dit vang.

“Harry!” sê Percy kwaai. “Geen towerspele in die gange nie. Ek sal dit moet aanmeld, besef jy!”

Dit kan Harry nie in die minste skeel nie. Hy het vir Malfoy die loef afgesteek en dit is ’n verlies van vyf punte vir Griffindor werd. Malfoy lyk briesend kwaad en toe Ginny verby hom na haar klas stap, skree hy wrevelig agter haar aan, “Ek dink nie Potter het van jou Valentynskaart gehou nie!”

Ginny bedek haar gesig met haar hande en hardloop die klas binne. Ron pluk sy towerstaf uit, maar Harry ruk hom weg. Ron kan regtig nie die hele tyd in die Towerspelklas sit en slakke braak nie.

Dis eers toe hulle by professor Flickerpitt se klas kom dat Harry iets vreemds aan Dhoewels se dagboek merk. Al sy ander boeke is vol rooi ink. Die dagboek is egter so skoon soos dit was voor die inkbottel daarvoor gebreek het. Hy probeer Ron se aandag trek om dit vir hom te wys, maar Ron sukkel al weer met sy towerstaf; groot, pers belle borrel uit die punt, en op hierdie oomblik is hy in niks anders geïnteresseerd nie.

Daardie aand gaan Harry bed toe voor enigiemand anders in sy slaapsaal, deels omdat hy dit nie sal kan verduur as Fred en George “*Sy oë is groener as gepiekelde paddas*” nog een keer moet sing nie, en deels omdat hy weer goed na Dhoewels se dagboek wil kyk en weet dat Ron dink hy mors sy tyd.

Harry gaan sit op die hemelbed en blaai deur die boek. Daar is nie ’n teken van rooi ink op die bladsye nie. Hy haal ’n nuwe bottel ink uit sy bedkassie, doop sy veerpen daarin en maak ’n klad op die eerste bladsy van die boek.

Vir ’n oomblik staan die ink helder uit en toe, asof dit uit die bladsy gesuig word, verdwyn dit. Opgewonde doop Harry weer sy pen in die ink en hierdie keer skryf hy, “My naam is Harry Potter.”

Vir 'n paar oomblikke skyn die woorde helder op die bladsy; toe verdwyn hulle spoorloos. En toe, uiteindelik, gebeur iets.

Woorde wat Harry nie geskryf het nie, verskyn in sy eie rooi ink op die bladsy.

"Hallo, Harry Potter. My naam is Erik Dhoewels. Waar het jy my dagboek gekry?"

Ook hierdie woorde vervaag, maar nie voor Harry weer begin skryf nie.

"Iemand het dit in 'n toilet probeer afspoei."

Hy wag gretig op Dhoewels se antwoord.

"Gelukkig bewaar ek my herinnerings op 'n manier wat meer permanent as ink is. Maar ek het geweet daar sal mense wees wat nie sal wil hê dat iemand hierdie dagboek lees nie."

"Wat bedoel jy?" skryf Harry. Van pure opgewondenheid maak hy groot kladde op die papier.

"Ek bedoel dat hierdie dagboek herinnerings aan vreeslike geheime bewaar. Dinge wat toegesmeer is. Dinge wat by Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Towerkuns gebeur het."

"Dis waar ek nou is," skryf Harry vinnig. "Ek is by Hogwarts en vreeslike dinge is aan die gebeur. Weet jy iets van die Kamer van Geheimenisse af?"

Nou hamer sy hart teen sy bors. Dhoewels se antwoord kom gou, sy handskrif raak al hoe meer onleesbaar, asof hy alles wat hy weet so vinnig moontlik wil neerskryf.

"Natuurlik weet ek van die Kamer van Geheimenisse. Op my dag het hulle vir ons gesê dat dit 'n legende is, dat dit nie bestaan nie. Maar dit was 'n leuen. In my vyfde jaar is die Kamer oopgemaak en die monster het etlike studente aangeval en selfs een doodgemaak. Ek het die persoon wat die Kamer oopgemaak het, gevang, en hy is geskors. Maar die skoolhoof, professor Dippet, was skaam dat so iets by Hogwarts gebeur het. Hy het my verbied om die waarheid te vertel. Die storie is versprei dat die meisie in 'n fratsongeluk dood is. Hulle het vir my 'n mooi, blink, gegraveerde trofee vir my moeite gegee en gesê ek moet my mond hou. Maar ek het geweet dit kan weer gebeur. Die monster leef voort en die een wat die mag het om dit vry te laat, is nie in die tronk nie."

Harry stamp amper sy inkbottel om, so gretig is hy om terug te skryf.

"Dit is weer aan die gebeur. Daar was reeds drie aanvalle en niemand weet wie agter alles sit nie. Wie was dit die vorige keer?"

"Ek kan jou wys as jy wil weet," kom Dhoewels se antwoord. "Jy hoef nie my woord te aanvaar nie. Ek kan jou langs die paaie van my herinnerings neem en vir jou wys wat daardie aand, toe ek hom gevang het, gebeur het."

Harry aarsel; sy veerpen hang oor die dagboek. Wat bedoel Dhoewels? Hoe kan hy langs die paaie van sy herinnerings geneem word? Hy loer

senuagtig na die deur voor die slaapsaal, wat reeds begin donker word. Toe hy weer na die dagboek kyk, begin nuwe woorde vorm aanneem.

“Kom ek wys jou.”

Harry huiwer ’n oomblik langer, toe skryf hy net een woord.

“Goed.”

Dis of ’n sterk wind begin waai. Die blaaie van die dagboek wapper en val oop by die helfte van Juniemaand. Met ’n mond wat wyd oophang, sien Harry hoe die blokkie vir Junie die dertiende, in iets soos ’n klein televisieskerm piep verander. Met hande wat effens bewe, lig hy die boek sodat hy sy oog teen die klein venstertjie kan druk, maar voor hy mooi weet wat aangaan, tuimel hy vooroor; die venstertjie gaan wyd oop, hy voel hoe sy liggaam die bed verlaat en hoe hy, kop eerste, in ’n warreling van kleur en skaduwees, deur die opening op die bladsy geslinger word.

Hy voel hoe sy voete soliede grond tref en hy bly bewend staan, terwyl die wasige vorms om hom skielik in fokus kom.

Hy weet dadelik waar hy is. Die sirkelvormige vertrek met die slapende portrette is Dompeldorius se kantoor – maar dis nie Dompeldorius wat agter die lessenaar sit nie. ’n Ou, verrimpelde towenaar met ’n pankop en net hier en daar enkele yl wit haartjies, sit en lees ’n brief in die lig van ’n kers. Harry het hierdie man nog nooit tevore gesien nie.

“E-ek is jammer,” stotter hy, “ek het nie bedoel om sommer net hier in te . . .”

Die towenaar kyk nie op nie. Hy lees voort, terwyl hy effens frons. Harry stap nader en stamel, “H’m – miskien moet ek liever loop?”

Nog steeds ignoreer die towenaar hom. Dis of hy hom nie eens gehoor het nie. Harry reken hy moet doof wees en hy praat harder.

“Jammer om te pla. Ek loop nou,” skreeu hy half.

Die towenaar vou die brief met ’n sug toe, staan op, stap verby Harry, sonder om eens na hom te kyk, en trek die gordyne voor sy venster oop.

Die lug buite die venster is so rooi soos robyne; dit moet die sonsondergang wees. Die towenaar gaan terug na sy lessenaar, gaan sit en speel met sy vingers, terwyl hy die deur dophou.

Harry bekyk die kantoor. Daar is nie ’n spoor van Fawkes die feniks nie en ook geen silwer katoeters nie. Dit is Hogwarts soos Dhoewels dit geken het en dit beteken dat hierdie onbekende towenaar daardie tyd se skoolhoof is, nie Dompeldorius nie, en dat hy wat Harry is, niks meer as ’n skim is nie – heeltemal onsigbaar vir die mense van vyftig jaar gelede.

Daar is ’n klop aan die kantoor se deur.

“Kom binne,” sê die ou towenaar in ’n flou stem.

’n Seun van so ongeveer sestien kom in en haal sy gepunte hoed af. ’n Silwer prefekwapentjie blink teen sy bors. Hy is heelwat langer as Harry, maar ook hy het pikswart hare.

“A, Dhoewels,” sê die skoolhoof.

“U wou my sien, professor Dippet?” sê Dhoewels. Hy lyk op sy senuwees.

“Sit, sit,” sê Dippet. “Ek het so pas die brief wat jy vir my gestuur het, gelees.”

“O,” sê Dhoewels. Hy gaan sit. Sy hande is styf in mekaar verstrengel.

“My liewe seun,” sê Dippet vriendelik, “ek kan onmoontlik toelaat dat jy die hele somer lank hier bly. Gaan dit nie vir jou lekkerder by die huis wees nie?”

“Nee,” sê Dhoewels dadelik, “ek bly veel eerder hier by Hogwarts as wat ek teruggaan na daardie – daardie –”

“Jy bly in ’n Moggelweeshuis tydens die vakansies, dan nie?” sê Dippet nuuskierig.

“Ja, professor,” sê Dhoewels en hy word rooi.

“Jou ouers was Moggels?”

“Halfbloed, professor,” sê Dhoewels. “My pa was ’n Moggel; my ma ’n heks.”

“En albei jou ouers – ?”

“My ma is oorlede kort na my geboorte, professor. Hulle het vir my by die weeshuis gesê dat sy net lank genoeg geleef het om vir my ’n naam te gee: Erik soos my pa, en Morte soos my oupa.”

Dippet klik sy tong simpatiek.

“Die probleem is, Erik,” sê hy sugtend, “ons sou vir jou spesiale reël-ings kon tref, maar onder die omstandighede . . .”

“U bedoel die aanvalle, professor?” sê Dhoewels en Harry se hart spring. Hy beweeg nader, bang dat hy iets sal mis.

“Presies,” sê die skoolhoof. “My liewe seun, jy moet tog insien dat dit uiters dwaas van my sal wees om jou aan die einde van die kwartaal by die kasteel te laat aanbly. Veral in die lig van die onlangse tragedie . . . die dood van daardie arme dogter . . . Jy sal baie veiliger by die weeshuis wees. Om die waarheid te sê, daar is sprake dat die Ministerie van Toewerkuns die skool gaan sluit. Ons het nog nie ’n idee wie verantwoordelik – h’m – wat die oorsaak van hierdie onaangenaamhede is nie . . .”

Dhoewels se oë rek.

“Professor – as die persoon gevang word . . . As alles sou ophou . . .”

“Waarvan praat jy?” Daar is ’n onverwagte kraak in Dippet se stem en hy sit regop in sy stoel. “Dhoewels, bedoel jy dat jy iets van hierdie aanvalle weet?”

“Nee, professor,” sê Dhoewels vinnig.

Maar Harry is oortuig dat dit dieselfde soort “nee” is wat hy vir Dompeldorius gegee het.

Dippet sak terug in sy stoel. Hy lyk teleurgesteld.

“Jy mag gaan, Erik . . .”

Dhoewels glip van sy stoel af en stap uit. Harry gaan agterna.

Al met die wenteltrap af, gaan hulle, tot by die drakekop in die donker gang. Daar steek Dhoewels vas en Harry, wat hom stip dophou, ook. Harry kan sien dat Dhoewels ernstig oor iets dink. Hy byt op sy lip en sy voorkop is geplooi.

Toe, asof hy meteens 'n besluit geneem het, stap hy haastig aan, met Harry wat geluidloos agter hom aanglip. Hulle sien niemand anders nie, tot hulle by die ingangsportaal kom waar 'n lang towenaar met swiepende rooibruin hare en 'n baard vir Dhoewels van die trappe af roep.

“Waarheen gaan jy so laat in die nag, Erik?”

Harry gaap die towenaar aan. Dit is niemand anders as Dompeldorius nie – vyftig jaar gelede.

“Ek moes die skoolhoof gaan sien, professor,” sê Dhoewels.

“Wel, opskud, bed toe,” sê Dompeldorius en gee Dhoewels daardie priemende blik wat Harry so goed ken. “Dis beter om deesdae nie alleen in die gange rond te loop nie. Nie sedert . . .”

Hy sug swaar, wens Dhoewels 'n goeienag toe en stap aan. Dhoewels kyk hom agterna tot hy buite sig is, toe beweeg hy vinnig na die klip-trappe wat na die kerkers lei, met Harry kort op sy hakke.

Tot Harry se teleurstelling lei Dhoewels hom nie na 'n versteekte gang of 'n geheime tunnel nie, maar na die presiese kerker waar Harry Tower-dranks by Snerp het. Die fakkels is nie aangesteek nie en toe Dhoewels die deur amper toestoot, kan Harry hom net-net deur 'n skrefie sien, waar hy botstil teen die kosyn staan en die gang dophou.

Dit voel vir Harry of hulle vir ten minste 'n uur staan en wag. Al wat hy die hele tyd kan sien, is Dhoewels se buitelyne agter die deur, waar hy soos 'n standbeeld staan en wag en deur die skreef tuur. Net toe Harry nie meer gespanne en vol afwagting voel nie en begin wens dat hy na sy eie tyd kan teruggaan, hoor hy iets aan die ander kant van die deur beweeg.

Iemand kom al met die gang langs gesluip. Hy hoor hoe wie dit ook al is verby die kerker stap waar hy en Dhoewels skuil. So stil soos 'n skadu-wee glip Dhoewels om die deur en sluip agter die figuur aan, met Harry, wat skoon vergeet het dat niemand hom kan hoor nie, op sy tone agterna.

Vir 'n goeie vyf minute volg hulle die voetstappe, tot Dhoewels skielik vassteek en sy kop in die rigting van nuwe geluide draai. Harry hoor 'n deur kraak en hoe iemand in 'n skor fluisterstem sê:

“Kom nou . . . moet jou hier uitkry . . . komaan . . . in die kis . . .”

Daar is iets bekends aan die stem.

Meteens spring Dhoewels om die hoek. Harry beweeg skuins agter hom. Hy sien die donker buitelyne van 'n groot seun wat voor 'n oop deur hurk. 'n Enorme kis staan langs hom.

“Goeienaand, Rubeus,” sê Dhoewels skerp.

Die seun slaan die deur toe en staan op.

“Wat maak jy hier, Erik?”

Dhoewels tree nader.

“Dis alles oor,” sê hy. “Ek moet jou aangee, Rubeus. Hulle praat van Hogwarts sluit as die aanvalle nie tot ’n einde kom nie.”

“Wat bedoe –”

“Ek dink nie jy het bedoel om iemand dood te maak nie. Maar monsters is nie goeie troeteldiere nie. Jy laat dit seker net uitkom om ’n bietjie oefening te kry, maar –”

“Hy het niemand doodgemaak nie!” sê die groot seun en tree terug tot teen die toe deur. Van agter hom hoor Harry ’n snaakse geklik en ’n geritsel.

“Komaan, Rubeus,” sê Dhoewels en beweeg nader. “Die kind wat dood is se ouers sal môre hier wees. Die minste wat Hogwarts kan doen, is om seker te maak dat die ding wat hul dogter doodgemaak het, tot niet gemaak is . . .”

“Dit was nie hy nie!” brul die seun en sy stem weergalm deur die donker gang. “Hy sal dit nie doen nie! Hy sal nie!”

“Gee pad,” sê Dhoewels en haal sy towerstaf uit.

Sy towerspreuk verlig die gang met ’n skielike vlamme lig. Die deur agter die groot seun vlieg oop met soveel geweld dat dit hom tot teen die oorkantste muur stamp. Toe kom iets daaruit wat Harry ’n lang, deurdringende kreet laat los, wat niemand behalwe hy oënskynlik kan hoor nie.

Die ding het ’n enorme, harige lyf, wat laag tussen ’n klomp swart bene hang, ’n horde klein, glimmende ogies en ’n paar vlymskerp knypers – weer lig Dhoewels sy towerstaf, maar hy is te laat. Die gedrog stamp hom uit die pad en skarrel weg, met die gang af en buite sig. Dhoewels steier orent en kyk dit agterna; hy lig sy towerstaf, maar die groot seun spring op hom, gryp die towerstaf by hom en slinger hom teen die vloer, terwyl hy “NEEEEEEE!” gil.

Die toneel draai, dis nou heeltemal donker. Harry voel hoe hy val. Hy land met ’n slag oopgespalk op sy hemelbed in die Griffindor-slaapsaal. Dhoewels se dagboek lê oop op sy maag.

Hy snak nog na asem toe die slaapsaal se deur oopgaan en Ron instap.

“O, daar is jy,” sê hy.

Harry kom orent. Hy is natgesweet en hy bewe.

“Wat gaan aan?” vra Ron en kyk bekommerd na hom.

“Dit was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid het die Kamer van Geheimenisse vyftig jaar gelede oopgemaak.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



CORNELIUS FUDGE

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always known that Hagrid had an unfortunate liking for large and monstrous creatures. During their first year at Hogwarts he had tried to raise a dragon in his little wooden house, and it would be a long time before they forgot the giant, three-headed dog he'd christened "Fluffy." And if, as a boy, Hagrid had heard that a monster was hidden somewhere in the castle, Harry was sure he'd have gone to any lengths for a glimpse of it. He'd probably thought it was a shame that the monster had been cooped up so long, and thought it deserved the chance to stretch its many legs; Harry could just imagine the thirteen-year-old Hagrid trying to fit a leash and collar on it. But he was equally certain that Hagrid would never have meant to kill anybody.

Harry half wished he hadn't found out how to work Riddle's diary. Again and again Ron and Hermione made him recount what he'd seen, until he was heartily sick of telling them and sick of the long,

circular conversations that followed.

“Riddle *might* have got the wrong person,” said Hermione. “Maybe it was some other monster that was attacking people. . . .”

“How many monsters d’you think this place can hold?” Ron asked dully.

“We always knew Hagrid had been expelled,” said Harry miserably. “And the attacks must’ve stopped after Hagrid was kicked out. Otherwise, Riddle wouldn’t have got his award.”

Ron tried a different tack.

“Riddle *does* sound like Percy — who asked him to squeal on Hagrid, anyway?”

“But the monster had *killed* someone, Ron,” said Hermione.

“And Riddle was going to go back to some Muggle orphanage if they closed Hogwarts,” said Harry. “I don’t blame him for wanting to stay here. . . .”

“You met Hagrid down Knockturn Alley, didn’t you, Harry?”

“He was buying a Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent,” said Harry quickly.

The three of them fell silent. After a long pause, Hermione voiced the knottiest question of all in a hesitant voice.

“Do you think we should go and *ask* Hagrid about it all?”

“That’d be a cheerful visit,” said Ron. “‘Hello, Hagrid. Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?’”

In the end, they decided that they would not say anything to Hagrid unless there was another attack, and as more and more days went by with no whisper from the disembodied voice, they became hopeful

that they would never need to talk to him about why he had been expelled. It was now nearly four months since Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been Petrified, and nearly everybody seemed to think that the attacker, whoever it was, had retired for good. Peeves had finally got bored of his “Oh, Potter, you rotter” song, Ernie Macmillan asked Harry quite politely to pass a bucket of leaping toadstools in Herbology one day, and in March several of the Mandrakes threw a loud and raucous party in greenhouse three. This made Professor Sprout very happy.

“The moment they start trying to move into each other’s pots, we’ll know they’re fully mature,” she told Harry. “Then we’ll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing.”

The second years were given something new to think about during their Easter holidays. The time had come to choose their subjects for the third year, a matter that Hermione, at least, took very seriously.

“It could affect our whole future,” she told Harry and Ron as they pored over lists of new subjects, marking them with checks.

“I just want to give up Potions,” said Harry.

“We can’t,” said Ron gloomily. “We keep all our old subjects, or I’d’ve ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“But that’s very important!” said Hermione, shocked.

“Not the way Lockhart teaches it,” said Ron. “I haven’t learned anything from him except not to set pixies loose.”

Neville Longbottom had been sent letters from all the witches and wizards in his family, all giving him different advice on what to choose. Confused and worried, he sat reading the subject lists with

his tongue poking out, asking people whether they thought Arithmancy sounded more difficult than Study of Ancient Runes. Dean Thomas, who, like Harry, had grown up with Muggles, ended up closing his eyes and jabbing his wand at the list, then picking the subjects it landed on. Hermione took nobody's advice but signed up for everything.

Harry smiled grimly to himself at the thought of what Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would say if he tried to discuss his career in wizardry with them. Not that he didn't get any guidance: Percy Weasley was eager to share his experience.

"Depends where you want to go, Harry," he said. "It's never too early to think about the future, so I'd recommend Divination. People say Muggle Studies is a soft option, but I personally think wizards should have a thorough understanding of the non-magical community, particularly if they're thinking of working in close contact with them — look at my father, he has to deal with Muggle business all the time. My brother Charlie was always more of an outdoor type, so he went for Care of Magical Creatures. Play to your strengths, Harry."

But the only thing Harry felt he was really good at was Quidditch. In the end, he chose the same new subjects as Ron, feeling that if he was lousy at them, at least he'd have someone friendly to help him.

Gryffindor's next Quidditch match would be against Hufflepuff. Wood was insisting on team practices every night after dinner, so that Harry barely had time for anything but Quidditch and homework. However, the training sessions were getting better, or at least drier, and the evening before Saturday's match he went up to his dormitory to drop off his broomstick feeling Gryffindor's chances for the

Quidditch Cup had never been better.

But his cheerful mood didn't last long. At the top of the stairs to the dormitory, he met Neville Longbottom, who was looking frantic.

"Harry — I don't know who did it — I just found —"

Watching Harry fearfully, Neville pushed open the door.

The contents of Harry's trunk had been thrown everywhere. His cloak lay ripped on the floor. The bedclothes had been pulled off his four-poster and the drawer had been pulled out of his bedside cabinet, the contents strewn over the mattress.

Harry walked over to the bed, openmouthed, treading on a few loose pages of *Travels with Trolls*. As he and Neville pulled the blankets back onto his bed, Ron, Dean, and Seamus came in. Dean swore loudly.

"What happened, Harry?"

"No idea," said Harry. But Ron was examining Harry's robes. All the pockets were hanging out.

"Someone's been looking for something," said Ron. "Is there anything missing?"

Harry started to pick up all his things and throw them into his trunk. It was only as he threw the last of the Lockhart books back into it that he realized what wasn't there.

"Riddle's diary's gone," he said in an undertone to Ron.

"*What?*"

Harry jerked his head toward the dormitory door and Ron followed him out. They hurried down to the Gryffindor common room, which was half-empty, and joined Hermione, who was sitting alone, reading a book called *Ancient Runes Made Easy*.

Hermione looked aghast at the news.

“But — only a Gryffindor could have stolen — nobody else knows our password —”

“Exactly,” said Harry.

They woke the next day to brilliant sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze.

“Perfect Quidditch conditions!” said Wood enthusiastically at the Gryffindor table, loading the team’s plates with scrambled eggs. “Harry, buck up there, you need a decent breakfast.”

Harry had been staring down the packed Gryffindor table, wondering if the new owner of Riddle’s diary was right in front of his eyes. Hermione had been urging him to report the robbery, but Harry didn’t like the idea. He’d have to tell a teacher all about the diary, and how many people knew why Hagrid had been expelled fifty years ago? He didn’t want to be the one who brought it all up again.

As he left the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to go and collect his Quidditch things, another very serious worry was added to Harry’s growing list. He had just set foot on the marble staircase when he heard it yet again —

“Kill this time . . . let me rip . . . tear . . .”

He shouted aloud and Ron and Hermione both jumped away from him in alarm.

“The voice!” said Harry, looking over his shoulder. “I just heard it again — didn’t you?”

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. Hermione, however, clapped a

hand to her forehead.

“Harry — I think I’ve just understood something! I’ve got to go to the library!”

And she sprinted away, up the stairs.

“*What* does she understand?” said Harry distractedly, still looking around, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

“Loads more than I do,” said Ron, shaking his head.

“But why’s she got to go to the library?”

“Because that’s what Hermione does,” said Ron, shrugging. “When in doubt, go to the library.”

Harry stood, irresolute, trying to catch the voice again, but people were now emerging from the Great Hall behind him, talking loudly, exiting through the front doors on their way to the Quidditch pitch.

“You’d better get moving,” said Ron. “It’s nearly eleven — the match —”

Harry raced up to Gryffindor Tower, collected his Nimbus Two Thousand, and joined the large crowd swarming across the grounds, but his mind was still in the castle along with the bodiless voice, and as he pulled on his scarlet robes in the locker room, his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game.

The teams walked onto the field to tumultuous applause. Oliver Wood took off for a warm-up flight around the goalposts; Madam Hooch released the balls. The Hufflepuffs, who played in canary yellow, were standing in a huddle, having a last-minute discussion of tactics.

Harry was just mounting his broom when Professor McGonagall came half marching, half running across the pitch, carrying an

enormous purple megaphone.

Harry's heart dropped like a stone.

"This match has been canceled," Professor McGonagall called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were boos and shouts. Oliver Wood, looking devastated, landed and ran toward Professor McGonagall without getting off his broomstick.

"But, Professor!" he shouted. "We've got to play — the Cup — *Gryffindor* —"

Professor McGonagall ignored him and continued to shout through her megaphone:

"All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

Then she lowered the megaphone and beckoned Harry over to her.

"Potter, I think you'd better come with me. . . ."

Wondering how she could possibly suspect him this time, Harry saw Ron detach himself from the complaining crowd; he came running up to them as they set off toward the castle. To Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall didn't object.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better come, too, Weasley. . . ."

Some of the students swarming around them were grumbling about the match being canceled; others looked worried. Harry and Ron followed Professor McGonagall back into the school and up the marble staircase. But they weren't taken to anybody's office this time.

"This will be a bit of a shock," said Professor McGonagall in a surprisingly gentle voice as they approached the infirmary. "There

has been another attack . . . another *double* attack.”

Harry’s insides did a horrible somersault. Professor McGonagall pushed the door open and he and Ron entered.

Madam Pomfrey was bending over a sixth-year girl with long, curly hair. Harry recognized her as the Ravenclaw they’d accidentally asked for directions to the Slytherin common room. And on the bed next to her was —

“*Hermione!*” Ron groaned.

Hermione lay utterly still, her eyes open and glassy.

“They were found near the library,” said Professor McGonagall. “I don’t suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them. . . .”

She was holding up a small, circular mirror.

Harry and Ron shook their heads, both staring at Hermione.

“I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower,” said Professor McGonagall heavily. “I need to address the students in any case.”

“All students will return to their House common rooms by six o’clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities.”

The Gryffindors packed inside the common room listened to Professor McGonagall in silence. She rolled up the parchment from which she had been reading and said in a somewhat choked voice, “I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that

the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward.”

She climbed somewhat awkwardly out of the portrait hole, and the Gryffindors began talking immediately.

“That’s two Gryffindors down, not counting a Gryffindor ghost, one Ravenclaw, and one Hufflepuff,” said the Weasley twins’ friend Lee Jordan, counting on his fingers. “Haven’t *any* of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn’t it *obvious* all this stuff’s coming from Slytherin? The *Heir* of Slytherin, the *monster* of Slytherin — why don’t they just chuck all the Slytherins out?” he roared, to nods and scattered applause.

Percy Weasley was sitting in a chair behind Lee, but for once he didn’t seem keen to make his views heard. He was looking pale and stunned.

“Percy’s in shock,” George told Harry quietly. “That Ravenclaw girl — Penelope Clearwater — she’s a prefect. I don’t think he thought the monster would dare attack a *prefect*.”

But Harry was only half-listening. He didn’t seem to be able to get rid of the picture of Hermione, lying on the hospital bed as though carved out of stone. And if the culprit wasn’t caught soon, he was looking at a lifetime back with the Dursleys. Tom Riddle had turned Hagrid in because he was faced with the prospect of a Muggle orphanage if the school closed. Harry now knew exactly how he had felt.

“What’re we going to do?” said Ron quietly in Harry’s ear. “D’you think they suspect Hagrid?”

“We’ve got to go and talk to him,” said Harry, making up his mind. “I can’t believe it’s him this time, but if he set the monster loose last time he’ll know how to get inside the Chamber of Secrets, and that’s a start.”

“But McGonagall said we’ve got to stay in our tower unless we’re in class —”

“I think,” said Harry, more quietly still, “it’s time to get my dad’s old Cloak out again.”

Harry had inherited just one thing from his father: a long and silvery Invisibility Cloak. It was their only chance of sneaking out of the school to visit Hagrid without anyone knowing about it. They went to bed at the usual time, waited until Neville, Dean, and Seamus had stopped discussing the Chamber of Secrets and finally fallen asleep, then got up, dressed again, and threw the Cloak over themselves.

The journey through the dark and deserted castle corridors wasn’t enjoyable. Harry, who had wandered the castle at night several times before, had never seen it so crowded after sunset. Teachers, prefects, and ghosts were marching the corridors in pairs, staring around for any unusual activity. Their Invisibility Cloak didn’t stop them making any noise, and there was a particularly tense moment when Ron stubbed his toe only yards from the spot where Snape stood standing guard. Thankfully, Snape sneezed at almost exactly the moment Ron swore. It was with relief that they reached the oak front doors and eased them open.

It was a clear, starry night. They hurried toward the lit windows of Hagrid’s house and pulled off the Cloak only when they were right

outside his front door.

Seconds after they had knocked, Hagrid flung it open. They found themselves face-to-face with him aiming a crossbow at them. Fang the boarhound barked loudly behind him.

“Oh,” he said, lowering the weapon and staring at them. “What’re you two doin’ here?”

“What’s that for?” said Harry, pointing at the crossbow as they stepped inside.

“Nothin’ — nothin’ —” Hagrid muttered. “I’ve bin expectin’ — doesn’t matter — Sit down — I’ll make tea —”

He hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He nearly extinguished the fire, spilling water from the kettle on it, and then smashed the teapot with a nervous jerk of his massive hand.

“Are you okay, Hagrid?” said Harry. “Did you hear about Hermione?”

“Oh, I heard, all righ’,” said Hagrid, a slight break in his voice.

He kept glancing nervously at the windows. He poured them both large mugs of boiling water (he had forgotten to add tea bags) and was just putting a slab of fruitcake on a plate when there was a loud knock on the door.

Hagrid dropped the fruitcake. Harry and Ron exchanged panic-stricken looks, then threw the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves and retreated into a corner. Hagrid checked that they were hidden, seized his crossbow, and flung open his door once more.

“Good evening, Hagrid.”

It was Dumbledore. He entered, looking deadly serious, and was followed by a second, very odd-looking man.

The stranger had rumpled gray hair and an anxious expression, and was wearing a strange mixture of clothes: a pinstriped suit, a scarlet tie, a long black cloak, and pointed purple boots. Under his arm he carried a lime-green bowler.

“That’s Dad’s boss!” Ron breathed. “Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic!”

Harry elbowed Ron hard to make him shut up.

Hagrid had gone pale and sweaty. He dropped into one of his chairs and looked from Dumbledore to Cornelius Fudge.

“Bad business, Hagrid,” said Fudge in rather clipped tones. “Very bad business. Had to come. Four attacks on Muggle-borns. Things’ve gone far enough. Ministry’s got to act.”

“I never,” said Hagrid, looking imploringly at Dumbledore. “You know I never, Professor Dumbledore, sir —”

“I want it understood, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confidence,” said Dumbledore, frowning at Fudge.

“Look, Albus,” said Fudge, uncomfortably. “Hagrid’s record’s against him. Ministry’s got to do something — the school governors have been in touch —”

“Yet again, Cornelius, I tell you that taking Hagrid away will not help in the slightest,” said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were full of a fire Harry had never seen before.

“Look at it from my point of view,” said Fudge, fidgeting with his bowler. “I’m under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing something. If it turns out it wasn’t Hagrid, he’ll be back and no more said. But I’ve got to take him. Got to. Wouldn’t be doing my duty —”

“Take me?” said Hagrid, who was trembling. “Take me where?”

“For a short stretch only,” said Fudge, not meeting Hagrid’s eyes. “Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution. If someone else is caught, you’ll be let out with a full apology —”

“Not Azkaban?” croaked Hagrid.

Before Fudge could answer, there was another loud rap on the door.

Dumbledore answered it. It was Harry’s turn for an elbow in the ribs; he’d let out an audible gasp.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy strode into Hagrid’s hut, swathed in a long black traveling cloak, smiling a cold and satisfied smile. Fang started to growl.

“Already here, Fudge,” he said approvingly. “Good, good . . .”

“What’re you doin’ here?” said Hagrid furiously. “Get outta my house!”

“My dear man, please believe me, I have no pleasure at all in being inside your — er — d’you call this a house?” said Lucius Malfoy, sneering as he looked around the small cabin. “I simply called at the school and was told that the headmaster was here.”

“And what exactly did you want with me, Lucius?” said Dumbledore. He spoke politely, but the fire was still blazing in his blue eyes.

“*Dreadful* thing, Dumbledore,” said Malfoy lazily, taking out a long roll of parchment, “but the governors feel it’s time for you to step aside. This is an Order of Suspension — you’ll find all twelve signatures on it. I’m afraid we feel you’re losing your touch. How many attacks have there been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn’t it? At this rate, there’ll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we

all know what an *awful* loss that would be to the school.”

“Oh, now, see here, Lucius,” said Fudge, looking alarmed, “Dumbledore suspended — no, no — last thing we want just now —”

“The appointment — or suspension — of the headmaster is a matter for the governors, Fudge,” said Mr. Malfoy smoothly. “And as Dumbledore has failed to stop these attacks —”

“See here, Malfoy, if *Dumbledore* can’t stop them,” said Fudge, whose upper lip was sweating now, “I mean to say, who *can*?”

“That remains to be seen,” said Mr. Malfoy with a nasty smile. “But as all twelve of us have voted —”

Hagrid leapt to his feet, his shaggy black head grazing the ceiling.

“An’ how many did yeh have ter threaten an’ blackmail before they agreed, Malfoy, eh?” he roared.

“Dear, dear, you know, that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid,” said Mr. Malfoy. “I would advise you not to shout at the Azkaban guards like that. They won’t like it at all.”

“Yeh can’ take Dumbledore!” yelled Hagrid, making Fang the boarhound cower and whimper in his basket. “Take him away, an’ the Muggle-borns won’ stand a chance! There’ll be killin’ next!”

“Calm yourself, Hagrid,” said Dumbledore sharply. He looked at Lucius Malfoy.

“If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside —”

“But —” stuttered Fudge.

“*No!*” growled Hagrid.

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Malfoy's cold gray ones.

"However," said Dumbledore, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, "you will find that I will only *truly* have left this school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

For a second, Harry was almost sure Dumbledore's eyes flickered toward the corner where he and Ron stood hidden.

"Admirable sentiments," said Malfoy, bowing. "We shall all miss your — er — highly individual way of running things, Albus, and only hope that your successor will manage to prevent any — ah — *killins*."

He strode to the cabin door, opened it, and bowed Dumbledore out. Fudge, fiddling with his bowler, waited for Hagrid to go ahead of him, but Hagrid stood his ground, took a deep breath, and said carefully, "If anyone wanted ter find out some *stuff*, all they'd have ter do would be ter follow the *spiders*. That'd lead 'em right! That's all I'm sayin'."

Fudge stared at him in amazement.

"All right, I'm comin'," said Hagrid, pulling on his moleskin overcoat. But as he was about to follow Fudge through the door, he stopped again and said loudly, "An' someone'll need ter feed Fang while I'm away."

The door banged shut and Ron pulled off the Invisibility Cloak.

"We're in trouble now," he said hoarsely. "No Dumbledore. They might as well close the school tonight. There'll be an attack a day

with him gone.”

Fang started howling, scratching at the closed door.

Cornelius Broddelwerk

Harry, Ron en Hermien het nog altyd geweet dat Hagrid 'n swak plek vir groot en monsteragtige gediertes het. Tydens hul eerste jaar op Hogwarts het hy probeer om 'n draak in sy houthut groot te maak en dit sal moeilik wees om die reusagtige driekoppige hond wat hy "Wollie" gedoop het, te vergeet. Indien Hagrid as seun moes hoor dat daar 'n monster iewers in die kasteel versteek is, is Harry seker dat hy sy bes sou doen om dit te sien. Hy sou beslis gevoel het dat dit 'n skande is om die monster vir so lank opgesluit te hou en dat die ding die kans verdien om sy hordes bene 'n slaggie te rek. Harry kan net dink hoe die dertienjarige Hagrid sou probeer het om 'n halsband en 'n leiriem vir hom aan te sit. Ook is hy vas oortuig dat Hagrid nie wou hê dat iemand doodgemaak moes word nie.

Harry wens half dat hy nie uitgevind het hoe Dhoewels se dagboek werk nie. Ron en Hermien laat hom oor en oor vertel wat hy alles gesien het, tot hy siek en sat is daarvan en ook vir die lang gesprek wat daarop volg.

"Dhoewels *kon* die verkeerde persoon gehad het," sê Hermien. "Dalk was dit 'n heel ander soort monster wat die mense aangeval het . . ."

"Hoeveel monsters kan daar nou eintlik in hierdie plek wees?" vra Ron somber.

"Ons het nog altyd geweet dat Hagrid geskors is," sê Harry mistroostig. "En die aanvalle moet gestop het na Hagrid uitgeskop is, anders sou Dhoewels nie daardie toekenning gekry het nie."

Ron probeer iets heel anders.

"Dhoewels klink vreeslik baie soos Percy – wie't in elk geval vir hom gevra om op Hagrid te spioeneer?"

"Die monster het iemand *doodgemaak*, Ron," sê Hermien.

"En Dhoewels moes na die een of ander Moggelweeshuis gaan as hulle Hogwarts sluit," sê Harry. "Ek kan hom nie juis kwalik neem dat hy eerder hier wou bly nie . . ."

Ron byt sy lip, dan sê hy huiwerig, "Jy het mos vir Hagrid in Konkulstraat raakgeloop, of hoe Harry?"

“Hy het vleisetende slakpille gekoop,” sê Harry vinnig.

Die driestuks is doodstil. Na 'n lang stilswye vra Hermien die moeilikste van al die vrae in 'n aarselende stem: “Dink julle ons kan vir Hagrid gaan *vra* wat gebeur het?”

“Dit sal vir jou 'n lekker kuiertjie wees,” sê Ron. “Hallo, Hagrid, sê gou hier, het jy dalk onlangs iets wat mal en vol hare is in die kasteel losgelaat?”

Op die ou einde besluit hulle om niks vir Hagrid te sê nie, tensy daar nog 'n aanval is, en soos die dae verbygaan sonder 'n fluistering van die liggaamlose stem, begin hulle hoop dat dit nooit nodig sal wees om hom uit te vra oor die rede vir sy skorsing nie. Dit is al amper vier maande sedert Justin en Nick-amper-sonder-kop Versteen is en feitlik almal dink dat die aanvaller, wie dit ook al was, vir goed opgehou het. Nurks het uiteindelik moeg geword vir sy “O Potter, jou otter”-lied, Ernie Macmillan het vir Harry baie beleef gevra om 'n emmer vol springende paddastoele in die Herbologie-klas aan te gee en in Maart het 'n paar van die alruine 'n wilde partytjie in Kweekhuis Drie gehou. Dit het professor Spruit baie gelukkig gemaak.

“Die oomblik dat hulle probeer om in mekaar se potte te klim, is wanneer ons weet dat hulle heeltemal groot is,” sê sy vir Harry. “Dan sal ons daardie arme mense in die siekeboeg kan help.”

Tydens die Paasvakansie het die tweedejaars iets om oor te dink. Dis tyd om hul vakke vir die derde jaar te kies, 'n saak wat Hermien, ten minste, baie ernstig opneem.

“Dit kan ons hele toekoms beïnvloed,” sê sy vir Harry en Ron toe hulle die lys vakke bestudeer en hier en daar regmerkies maak.

“As ek net met Towerdrankies kan ophou,” sê Harry.

“Ons kan nie,” sê Ron grimmig. “Ons hou al die ou vakke, of ek het sowaar vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste gelos.”

“Maar dis baie belangrik!” sê Hermien geskok.

“Nie soos Lockhart dit gee nie,” sê Ron. “Ek het nog niks by hom geleer nie, behalwe om Korniese Kabouters nooit los te laat nie.”

Neville Loggerenberg het briewe van al die hekse en towenaars in sy familie gekry en almal het hom ander raad gegee oor wat hy moet kies. Heel verward en omgekras en met 'n tong wat ver uitsteek, sit hy die lys van vakke en lees, terwyl hy mense vra of hulle dink Aritmansie klink moeiliker as die Studie van Antieke Toortekens. Dean Thomas wat, net soos Harry, by Moggels grootgeword het, maak op die ou end bloot sy oë toe, steek met sy towerstaf na die lys en vat al die vakke waarop dit land. Hermien vra vir niemand raad nie. Sy skryf vir alles in.

Harry glimlag grimmig teenoor homself toe hy dink aan wat oom Vernon en tant Petunia sal sê as hy moet probeer om sy loopbaan in towery

met hulle te bespreek. Nie dat hy nie raad kry nie: Percy Weasley is meer as bereid om sy ervaring met hom te deel.

“Dit hang af wat jy wil doen, Harry,” sê hy. “Dis nooit te vroeg om aan die toekoms te dink nie, dus sal ek Wiggelary aanbeveel. Mense sê die Studie van Moggels is ’n blote stopvak, maar ek dink alle towenaars moet die niemagiëse gemeenskap verstaan, veral as hulle in noue kontak met hulle gaan wees – kyk vir my pa, hy het gedurig met Moggelsake te doen. My broer Charlie was altyd iemand vir die buitelewe, dus was Versorging van Magiese Kreature ’n natuurlike keuse vir hom. Ontwikkel jou sterk punte, Harry.”

Die enigste ding waarin Harry voel dat hy regtig goed is, is Kwiddiek. Op die ou end kies hy al die vakke wat Ron ook het. As hy dan vrot daarin is, sal daar ten minste iemand wees om hom te help.

Griffindor se volgende Kwiddiekwedstryd is teen Hoesenproes. Wood dring daarop aan dat die spanne elke aand na ete moet oefen, sodat Harry skaars tyd het vir enigiets anders as Kwiddiek en huiswerk. Die oefensessies word al beter, of liewer, droër, en die aand voor Saterdag se wedstryd, toe hy na die slaapsaal stap om sy besem te gaan bêre, voel hy dat Griffindor se kanse om die Kwiddiekbeker te wen, nog nooit beter was nie.

Sy goeie bui is van korte duur. Aan die bopunt van die trappe na die slaapsaal kry hy vir Neville Loggerenberg wat erg ontsteld lyk.

“Harry – ek weet nie wie dit gedoen het nie. Ek het hierop afgekom –” Neville kyk benoud na Harry en stoot die deur oop.

Die inhoud van Harry se trommel is gesaai oor die vloer. Sy mantel lê eenkant, geskeur. Die beddegoed is van die hemelbed afgetrek en die laai is uit sy bedkassie getrek en die inhoud is oor die matras gestrooi.

Met ’n oop mond stap Harry na sy bed en trap op ’n paar los blaaië wat uit *Toer met Trolle* kom.

Terwyl hy en Neville die komberse weer op die bed sit, kom Ron, Dean en Septimus in. Dean vloek hard.

“Wat het gebeur, Harry?”

“Nie ’n idee nie,” sê Harry, maar Ron bekijk Harry se kleed. Al die sakke is omgedop.

“Iemand het iets gesoek,” sê Ron. “Wat is weg?”

Harry begin sy goed optel en in sy trommel gooi. Dis eers toe hy die laaste Lockhart-boek wegpak dat hy besef wat nie meer daar is nie.

“Dhoewels se dagboek is weg,” sê hy gedemp aan Ron.

“Wat?”

Harry wys met sy kop in die rigting van die slaapsaal deur en Ron stap saam met hom uit. Hulle draf af na die Griffindor-geselskamer, wat half-leeg is en gaan sit by Hermien, wat eenkant ’n boek met die titel *Antieke Toortekens vir Beginners* sit en lees.

Hermien lyk geskok toe sy die nuus hoor.

“Maar – net ’n Griffindor kon dit gevat het – niemand anders ken die wagwoord nie . . .”

“Presies,” sê Harry.

Toe hulle die volgende dag wakker word, skyn die son en daar waai ’n verfrissende briesie.

“Volmaakte Kwiddiektostande,” sê Wood entoesiasties aan die Griffindor-tafel terwyl hy die spanlede se borde vol roereier laai. “Harry, opskud, jy het ’n goeie ontbyt nodig.”

Harry het na die vol Griffindor-tafel sit en staar en gewonder of die nuwe eienaar van Dhoewels se dagboek hier onder sy oë sit. Hermien het daarop aangedring dat hy die diefstal aangee, maar Harry wou dit nie doen nie. Dan sal hy vir ’n onderwyser alles oor die dagboek moet vertel en hoeveel mense sal nog weet waarom Hagrid vyftig jaar gelede geskors is? Hy wil nie die een wees wat dit alles weer op die lappe bring nie.

Dis toe hy saam met Ron en Hermien uit die Groot Saal stap om sy Kwiddieklere te gaan haal dat ’n groot bekommernis by Harry se groeiende lys gevoeg word. Hy het sy voet net op die onderste treetjie van die marmertrappe gesit, toe hy die woorde hoor: “Moor hierdie keer . . . skeur . . .”

Hy gil so hard dat Ron en Hermien benoud eenkant toe spring.

“Die stem!” Harry loer oor sy skouer. “Ek het dit nou net weer gehoor – het julle?”

Ron skud sy kop. Sy oë is wydgeriek. Hermien se hand vlieg na haar voorkop.

“Harry – ek dink ek begin iets verstaan! Ek gaan gou biblioteek toe!” Sy spring weg en hardloop met die trappe op.

“Wat verstaan sy nou weer kamma?” sê Harry afgetrokke terwyl hy nog steeds rondkyk om te probeer agterkom waarvandaan die stem gekom het.

“Baie meer as wat *ek* verstaan.” Ron skud sy kop.

“Wat wil sy in die biblioteek gaan maak?”

“Dis mos wat Hermien altyd doen,” sê Ron en haal sy skouers op. “Wanneer jy twyfel, gaan jy biblioteek toe.”

Harry trap besluiteloos rond. Hy probeer luister of hy die stem weer kan hoor, maar daar kom mense wat hard praat uit die Groot Saal agter hom. Hulle stap deur die groot eikehoutdeure op pad na die Kwiddiekveld.

“Jy moet opskud,” sê Ron. “Dis amper elfuur – die wedstryd.”

Harry hardloop na die Griffindor-toring, gryp sy Nimbus Tweeduisend en sluit aan by die skare wat oor die terrein wemel, maar sy gedagtes is

steeds in die kasteel by die liggaamlose stem. Terwyl hy sy rooi klere in die kleedkamer aantrek, is sy enigste troos dat almal nou buite op die veld is om na die wedstryd te kyk.

Die spanne loop onder luide applous op die veld. Oliver Wood styg op vir 'n opwarmingsvlug om die doelpale en Madame Hooch laat die balle los. Die Hoesenproesers, wat in kanariegeel speel, maak houpie om vir oulaas hul taktiek te bespreek.

Harry is net besig om op sy besem te klim toe professor McGonagall met 'n groot pers megafoon in die hand oor die veld aangedraf kom.

Harry se hart val soos 'n klip.

“Die wedstryd is gekanselleer,” roep professor McGonagall deur die megafoon. Daar is 'n gejou en 'n gejl van die gepakte stadion. Oliver Wood lyk lelik bekaf. Hy stryk neer en hardloop na professor McGonagall sonder om eens van sy besemstok af te klim.

“Maar professor!” gil hy, “ons moet speel . . . die beker . . . *Griffindor* . . .”

Professor McGonagall steur haar nie aan hom nie. Sy skree deur die megafoon: “Alle studente moet onmiddellik na hul geselskamers gaan waar die Hoofde van hul Huise verdere inligting sal gee. So vinnig as wat julle kan, asseblief!”

Toe laat sak sy die megafoon en wink Harry nader.

“Potter, ek dink jy moet saam met my kom . . .”

Harry wonder regtig hoe sy hom hierdie keer kan verdink. Hy sien hoe Ron homself losmaak uit die skare en agter hulle aanhardloop toe hulle na die kasteel stap. Tot Harry se verbasing maak professor McGonagall nie beswaar nie.

“Ja, miskien moet jy ook kom, Weasley.”

Party van die studente krioel om hulle en brom ontevrede oor die wedstryd wat afgestel is; ander lyk bekommerd. Harry en Ron stap agter professor McGonagall aan tot by die skool en by die marmertappe op. Hierdie keer gaan hulle nie na iemand se kantoor nie.

“Dit gaan 'n bietjie van 'n skok wees,” sê professor McGonagall in 'n verbasend sagte stem toe hulle na die siekeboeg stap. “Daar was nog 'n aanval . . . 'n dubbele aanval.”

Harry se maag draai aaklig. Professor McGonagall maak die deur oop en hy en Ron stap in.

Madame Pomfrey staan gebukkend oor 'n meisie met lang krulhare, wat in haar vyfde jaar is. Harry herken haar dadelik as die Raweklouer vir wie hulle per ongeluk gevra het waar Slibberin se geselskamer is. Op die bed langs haar is –

“*Hermien!*” kreun Ron.

Hermien lê heeltemal stil, haar oë is oop en glasig.

“Hulle is naby die biblioteek gevind,” sê professor McGonagall. “Ek

veronderstel julle kan geen verduideliking hiervoor gee nie? Dit was op die vloer langs hulle . . .”

Sy hou 'n klein ronde spieëltjie in die lug.

Harry en Ron skud hul koppe, terwyl hulle na Hermien staar.

“Ek sal saam met julle na die Griffindor-toring stap,” sê professor McGonagall somber. “Ek moet in elk geval met die studente praat.”

“Alle studente sal elke aand om sesuur na hul geselskamers terugkeer. Geen student mag die slaapsale na daardie tyd verlaat nie. Tussen klasse sal julle deur 'n onderwyser na die volgende klaskamer vergesel word. Geen student mag badkamer toe gaan sonder dat 'n onderwyser saam met hom of haar stap nie. Alle verdere Kwiddiekoefeninge en -wedstryde word uitgestel. Daar sal geen verdere aktiwiteite in die aand wees nie.”

Die Griffindors in die vol geselskamer luister in stilte na professor McGonagall se woorde. Sy rol die perkament waaruit sy gelees het, op, en sê met 'n stem wat in haar keel stok, “Ek hoef seker nie te sê dat ek amper nog nooit so ontsteld was nie. Die skool kan heel moontlik gesluit word as die skuldige nie gevang word nie. Indien daar iemand is wat enigiets weet, wil ek hulle ten sterkste aanmoedig om na vore te kom.”

Sy klouter ietwat lomperig deur die portretopening en die Griffindors begin onmiddellik praat.

“Dis twee Griffindors en die Griffindorspook, een van Raweklou en een Hoesenproeser,” sê die Weasley-tweeling se vriend, Lee Jordaan, terwyl hy op sy vingers tel. “Het nie eens *een* van die onderwysers gemerk dat al die Slibberins veilig is nie? Is dit nie *duidelik* dat dit van Slibberin af kom nie? Die *Erfgenaam* van Slibberin, die *monster* van Slibberin – hoekom smyt hulle nie net al die Slibberins uit nie?” brul hy, terwyl almal knik en mense hier en daar hande klap.

Percy Weasley sit eenkant in 'n stoel agter Lee, maar vir een keer in sy lewe sê hy nie 'n woord nie. Hy is bleek in die gesig en lyk dronkgeslaan.

“Percy is in skok,” sê George saggies vir Harry. “Daardie Raweklou-meisie – Penelope Clearwater – sy's 'n prefek. Hy het nie gedink die monster sal 'n *prefek* aanval nie.”

Harry luister net met 'n halwe oor. Hy kan net nie ophou dink aan die prentjie van Hermien op die hospitaalbed, soos iets wat uit klip gekerf is nie. As die skuldige nie gou gevang word nie, wag daar 'n leeftyd saam met die Dursleys op Harry. Erik Dhoewels het vir Hagrid aangegee omdat hy na 'n Moggelweeshuis moes gaan as die skool sou sluit. Harry weet nou presies hoe hy gevoel het.

“Wat gaan ons doen?” sê Ron saggies in Harry se oor. “Dink jy hulle verdink Hagrid?”

Harry dink vinnig. “Ons moet met hom gaan praat,” sê hy. “Ek kan nie glo dat dit hierdie keer hy is nie, maar as hy die monster die vorige keer

losgelaat het, sal hy weet hoe om in die Kamer van Geheimenisse te kom en dit is darem 'n begin."

"Maar McGonagall het gesê ons moet in ons toring bly behalwe as ons klas –"

"Ek dink," sê Harry, nog sagter, "dis tyd dat ek weer my pa se ou mantel uithaal."

Harry het een ding van sy pa geërf: 'n lang silwer Onsigbaarheidsmantel. Dit is hul enigste kans om uit die skool te glip en na Hagrid te gaan sonder dat iemand daarvan weet. Hulle gaan soos gewoonlik bed toe en wag tot Neville, Dean en Septimus opgehou het om oor die Kamer van Geheimenisse te praat en aan die slaap geraak het, voor hulle opstaan, aantrek en die mantel oor hulle gooi.

Die reis deur die donker en verlate kasteelgange is glad nie prettig nie. Harry, wat al dikwels tevore in die nag in die kasteel rondgeloop het, het dit nog nooit so vol mense gesien na sonsondergang nie. Onderwysers, prefekte en spoke marsjeer twee-twee op en af in die gange en kyk rond vir ongewone bedrywighede. Die Onsigbaarheidsmantel keer nie dat hulle lawaai maak nie, en daar is 'n besonder benoude oomblik toe Ron sy toon stamp enkele meters van waar Snerp wag staan. Gelukkig nies Snerp toevallig op dieselfde oomblik dat Ron 'n lelike woord sê. Hulle is bitter verlig toe hulle die swaar eikehoutvoordeure oopstoot.

Dit is 'n helder nag vol sterre. Hulle haas hul na die verligte vensters van Hagrid se hut en haal die mantel eers af toe hulle voor sy deur staan.

Binne oomblikke nadat hulle geklop het, gooi Hagrid die deur oop. Hulle kyk vas in 'n oorgehaalde kruisboog en Tande, die beerhond, blaf luidkeels agter hom.

"O," sê Hagrid. Hy laat die kruisboog sak en staar na hulle. "Wat maak julle hier?"

"Wat maak jy daarmee?" Harry beduie na die kruisboog toe hulle instap.

"Niks . . . niks," mompel Hagrid. "Ek verwag . . . maak nie saak nie . . . sit, sit, ek maak tee . . ."

Dis of hy nie mooi weet wat hy doen nie. Hy smoor die vuur amper dood toe hy water uit die ketel daarop mors en breek die teepot toe sy enorme hand senuagtig ruk.

"Wat makeer, Hagrid?" sê Harry. "Het jy gehoor van Hermien?"

"Ja, ek het gehoor," sê Hagrid en dis of sy stem breek.

Hy kyk aanhoudend senuagtig na die vensters. Hy skink groot bekere vol kookwater (hy het vergeet om teesakkies in te sit) en is net besig om vrugtekoek op 'n bord te pak toe iemand hard aan die deur klop.

Hagrid laat die vrugtekoek val. Harry en Ron kyk benoud na mekaar, toe trek hulle die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor hul koppe en gaan kruip

eenkant in 'n hoekie weg. Hagrid maak seker dat hulle goed versteek is, toe gryp hy sy kruisboog en maak die deur oop.

“Goeienaand, Hagrid.”

Dit is Dompeldorius. Hy lyk baie ernstig. Hy stap in, gevolg deur 'n tweede man wat baie eienaardig lyk.

Die vreemdeling is 'n kort, gesette man met deurmekaar, grys hare en 'n angstige uitdrukking op sy gesig. Hy dra 'n snaakse kombinasie van klere: 'n strepiespak, 'n skarlakenrooi das, 'n lang swart mantel en gepunte pers stewels. Onder sy arm hou hy 'n lemmetjiegroen dophoed.

“Dis my pa se baas!” fluister Ron. “Cornelius Broddelwerk, die Minister van Towerkuns!”

Harry pomp hom hard in die ribbes sodat hy moet stilbly.

Hagrid lyk bleek en natgesweet. Hy val in een van sy stoele neer en staar van Dompeldorius na Cornelius Broddelwerk.

“Dinge lyk nie goed nie, Hagrid,” sê Broddelwerk saaklik. “Glad nie goed nie. Moes eenvoudig kom. Vier aanvalle op studente met Moggelouers. Dinge het te ver gegaan. Die Ministerie moet optree.”

“Dis nie ek nie.” Hagrid kyk smekend na Dompeldorius. “U weet dis nie ek nie, professor Dompeldorius . . .”

“Ek wil dit duidelik stel dat ek volle vertroue in Hagrid het, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy vir Broddelwerk frons.

“Kyk, Albus,” sê Broddelwerk ongemaklik. “Hagrid se rekord tel teen hom. Die Ministerie moet iets doen – die skool se bestuursliggaam het ons gekontak.”

“Ek sê weer, Cornelius, dit sal absoluut niks help om vir Hagrid weg te neem nie,” sê Dompeldorius. Sy blou oë is vol vuur. Harry het hom nog nooit tevore so sien lyk nie.

“Beskou dit van my kant af,” sê Broddelwerk en vroetel met sy dophoed. “Ek is onder geweldige druk. Moet gesien word dat ek iets doen. As dit op die ou end blyk dat dit nie Hagrid was nie, kom hy terug en geen haan sal daarna kraai nie. Maar ek moet hom wegneem. Moet net. Sal my plig versuim –”

“My wegneem?” sê Hagrid wat nou behoorlik bewo. “My waarheen neem?”

“Net vir 'n kort rukkie,” sê Broddelwerk, maar hy kan Hagrid nie in die oë kyk nie. “Dis nie 'n straf nie, Hagrid, eerder 'n voorkomende maatreël. Sodra iemand anders gevang is, word jy vrygelaat met volle . . .”

“Nie Azkaban nie . . .” sê Hagrid skor.

Voor Broddelwerk kan antwoord, weerklink nog 'n harde geklop teen die deur.

Dompeldorius maak oop. Dit is Harry se beurt om 'n elmboog in die ribbes te kry: hy snak hoorbaar na asem.

Mnr. Lucius Malfoy kom Hagrid se hut binne. Hy is toegewikkel in 'n

lang swart reismantel en sy glimlag is koud en selfvoldaan. Tande begin grom.

“Alreeds hier, Broddelwerk?” sê hy goedkeurend. “Mooi, mooi . . .”

“Wat maak jy hier?” sê Hagrid woedend. “Trap uit my huis uit!”

“My liewe mens, glo my, dis geen plesier om in hierdie – h’m – huis te wees nie,” sê Lucius Malfoy en staar minagtend na die klein houthut. “Ek het na die skool gegaan en dit is vir my gesê dat die Skoolhoof hier is.”

“En presies wat wil jy van my hê, Lucius?” vra Dompeldorius. Sy woorde klink uiters beleef, maar die vuur gloei steeds in sy blou oë.

“Vreeslike tyding, Dompeldorius,” sê mnr. Malfoy luiweg, terwyl hy ’n lang perkament uithaal. “Die bestuurslede voel dis tyd dat jy uittree. Dit is ’n Bevel van Opskorting van Dienste – jy sal al twaalf handtekeninge daarop sien. Ek is bevrees ons voel jy het jou slag verloor. Hoeveel aanvalle was hier? Nog twee, net vanmiddag, nè? Teen hierdie tempo is daar binnekort niks meer studente met Moggelbloed in Hogwarts nie, en ons weet almal wat ’n *verskriklike* verlies dit sal wees.”

“O, nou kyk hier, Lucius,” sê Broddelwerk en hy lyk ontsteld. “Dompeldorius se dienste opgeskort . . . nee, nee . . . dis die laaste ding wat ons nou wil hê . . .”

“Die aanstelling – of opskorting – van die Skoolhoof is ’n saak vir die bestuurslede, Broddelwerk,” sê mnr. Malfoy gladweg. “En siende dat Dompeldorius nie daarin kon slaag om die aanvalle te verhoed nie . . .”

“Nou luister hier, Lucius, as *Dompeldorius* die aanvalle nie kan keer nie –” sê Broddelwerk, wie se bolip begin sweet het, “ek bedoel, wie *kan*?”

“Dit sal ons moet sien,” sê mnr. Malfoy met ’n gemene laggie. “Maar aangesien al twaalf van ons daarvoor gestem het . . .”

Hagrid spring op, sy woeste swart kop raak-raak aan die plafon.

“En hoeveel moes jy dreig en afpers voor hulle geteken het, Malfoy?” brul hy.

“Liewe land, jy weet, daardie humeur van jou gaan jou nog duur te staan kom, Hagrid,” sê mnr. Malfoy. “Ek sal jou aanraai om nie so op die wagte by Azkaban te skree nie. Hulle sal niks daarvan hou nie.”

“Julle kan nie vir Dompeldorius wegvat nie!” skree Hagrid sodat Tande, die beerhond, tjankend in sy mandjie kruip. “Vat hom weg en diegene met Moggelouers het nie ’n kans nie! Volgende keer sal daar ’n gemoordery wees!”

“Bedaar, Hagrid,” sê Dompeldorius skerp. Hy kyk na Lucius Malfoy.

“As die bestuurslede my bedanking vereis, Lucius, sal ek uit die aard van die saak uittree.”

“Maar –” stotter Broddelwerk.

“Nee!” grom Hagrid.

Dompeldorius draai sy blink blou oë nie vir een oomblik weg van Lucius Malfoy se koue grys kykers nie.

“Desnieteenstaande,” sê Dompeldorius en hy praat baie stadig en duidelik sodat niemand ’n woord kan mis nie, “sal julle vind dat ek die skool alleenlik *werklik* verlaat het wanneer niemand meer lojaal is teenoor my nie. In Hogwarts word altyd hulp gegee aan diegene wat daarvoor vra.”

Vir ’n oomblik is Harry amper seker dat Dompeldorius se oë in die rigting van die hoekie waar hy en Ron skuil, geflikker het.

“Pragtige gedagtes,” sê Malfoy en buig. “Ons sal die – h’m – hoogs unieke manier waarop jy dinge doen, mis, Albus, en bly hoop dat jou opvolger daarin sal slaag om – h’m – ’n *gemoordery*’ te verhoed.”

Met ’n paar lang tree is hy by die hut se voordeur, het hy dit oopgemaak en vir Dompeldorius buigend die deur gewys. Broddelwerk vroetel met sy dophoed en wys dat Hagrid voor hom moet uitloop, maar Hagrid roer nie; hy trek sy asem diep in en sê afgemete, “As iemand dalk iets wil weet, moet hulle die *spinnekoppe* volg. Dit sal hulle wys wat hulle moet doen. Dis al wat ek sê.”

Broddelwerk gaap hom verwonderd aan.

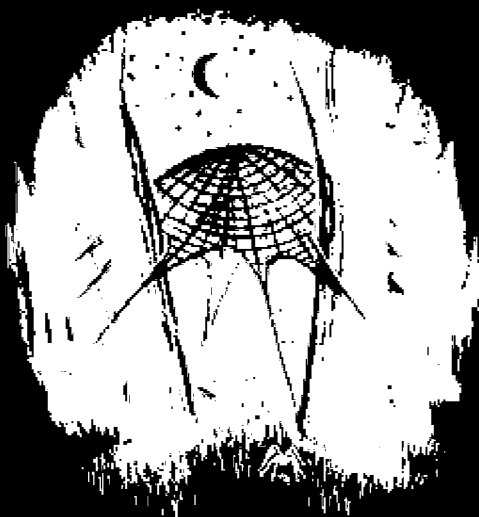
“Goed, goed, ek kom,” sê Hagrid en trek sy molveljas aan. Net voor hy agter Broddelwerk aan stap, steek hy vas en sê hard, “Iemand sal vir Tande moet kosgee terwyl ek weg is.”

Die deur klap toe en Ron gooi die Onsigbaarheidsmantel af.

“Nou is ons behoorlik in die sop,” sê hy skor. “Geen Dompeldorius nie. Hulle kan die skool net sowel vannag toemaak. Sonder hom sal daar elke dag ’n aanval wees.”

Tande begin tjank en krap teen die toe deur.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ARAGOG

Summer was creeping over the grounds around the castle; sky and lake alike turned periwinkle blue and flowers large as cabbages burst into bloom in the greenhouses. But with no Hagrid visible from the castle windows, striding the grounds with Fang at his heels, the scene didn't look right to Harry; no better, in fact, than the inside of the castle, where things were so horribly wrong.

Harry and Ron had tried to visit Hermione, but visitors were now barred from the hospital wing.

"We're taking no more chances," Madam Pomfrey told them severely through a crack in the infirmary door. "No, I'm sorry, there's every chance the attacker might come back to finish these people

off . . .”

With Dumbledore gone, fear had spread as never before, so that the sun warming the castle walls outside seemed to stop at the mullioned windows. There was barely a face to be seen in the school that didn't look worried and tense, and any laughter that rang through the corridors sounded shrill and unnatural and was quickly stifled.

Harry constantly repeated Dumbledore's final words to himself. *“I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. . . . Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.”* But what good were these words? Who exactly were they supposed to ask for help, when everyone was just as confused and scared as they were?

Hagrid's hint about the spiders was far easier to understand — the trouble was, there didn't seem to be a single spider left in the castle to follow. Harry looked everywhere he went, helped (rather reluctantly) by Ron. They were hampered, of course, by the fact that they weren't allowed to wander off on their own but had to move around the castle in a pack with the other Gryffindors. Most of their fellow students seemed glad that they were being shepherded from class to class by teachers, but Harry found it very irksome.

One person, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere of terror and suspicion. Draco Malfoy was strutting around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy. Harry didn't realize what he was so pleased about until the Potions lesson about two weeks after Dumbledore and Hagrid had left, when, sitting right behind Malfoy, Harry overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle.

“I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore,” he said, not troubling to keep his voice down. “I told you he thinks Dumbledore’s the worst headmaster the school’s ever had. Maybe we’ll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won’t *want* the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won’t last long, she’s only filling in. . . .”

Snape swept past Harry, making no comment about Hermione’s empty seat and cauldron.

“Sir,” said Malfoy loudly. “Sir, why don’t *you* apply for the headmaster’s job?”

“Now, now, Malfoy,” said Snape, though he couldn’t suppress a thin-lipped smile. “Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I daresay he’ll be back with us soon enough.”

“Yeah, right,” said Malfoy, smirking. “I expect you’d have Father’s vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job — *I’ll* tell Father you’re the best teacher here, sir —”

Snape smirked as he swept off around the dungeon, fortunately not spotting Seamus Finnigan, who was pretending to vomit into his cauldron.

“I’m quite surprised the Mudbloods haven’t all packed their bags by now,” Malfoy went on. “Bet you five Galleons the next one dies. Pity it wasn’t Granger —”

The bell rang at that moment, which was lucky; at Malfoy’s last words, Ron had leapt off his stool, and in the scramble to collect bags and books, his attempts to reach Malfoy went unnoticed.

“Let me at him,” Ron growled as Harry and Dean hung onto his arms. “I don’t care, I don’t need my wand, I’m going to kill him with

my bare hands —”

“Hurry up, I’ve got to take you all to Herbology,” barked Snape over the class’s heads, and off they marched, with Harry, Ron, and Dean bringing up the rear, Ron still trying to get loose. It was only safe to let go of him when Snape had seen them out of the castle and they were making their way across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses.

The Herbology class was very subdued; there were now two missing from their number, Justin and Hermione.

Professor Sprout set them all to work pruning the Abyssinian Shrivelfigs. Harry went to tip an armful of withered stalks onto the compost heap and found himself face-to-face with Ernie Macmillan. Ernie took a deep breath and said, very formally, “I just want to say, Harry, that I’m sorry I ever suspected you. I know you’d never attack Hermione Granger, and I apologize for all the stuff I said. We’re all in the same boat now, and, well —”

He held out a pudgy hand, and Harry shook it.

Ernie and his friend Hannah came to work at the same Shrivelfig as Harry and Ron.

“That Draco Malfoy character,” said Ernie, breaking off dead twigs, “he seems very pleased about all this, doesn’t he? D’you know, I think *he* might be Slytherin’s heir.”

“That’s clever of you,” said Ron, who didn’t seem to have forgiven Ernie as readily as Harry.

“Do you think it’s Malfoy, Harry?” Ernie asked.

“No,” said Harry, so firmly that Ernie and Hannah stared.

A second later, Harry spotted something.

Several large spiders were scuttling over the ground on the other side of the glass, moving in an unnaturally straight line as though taking the shortest route to a prearranged meeting. Harry hit Ron over the hand with his pruning shears.

“Ouch! What’re you —”

Harry pointed out the spiders, following their progress with his eyes screwed up against the sun.

“Oh, yeah,” said Ron, trying, and failing, to look pleased. “But we can’t follow them now —”

Ernie and Hannah were listening curiously.

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he focused on the spiders. If they pursued their fixed course, there could be no doubt about where they would end up.

“Looks like they’re heading for the Forbidden Forest. . . .”

And Ron looked even unhappier about that.

At the end of the lesson Professor Sprout escorted the class to their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. Harry and Ron lagged behind the others so they could talk out of earshot.

“We’ll have to use the Invisibility Cloak again,” Harry told Ron. “We can take Fang with us. He’s used to going into the forest with Hagrid, he might be some help.”

“Right,” said Ron, who was twirling his wand nervously in his fingers. “Er — aren’t there — aren’t there supposed to be werewolves in the forest?” he added as they took their usual places at the back of Lockhart’s classroom.

Preferring not to answer that question, Harry said, “There are good things in there, too. The centaurs are all right, and the unicorns . . .”

Ron had never been into the Forbidden Forest before. Harry had entered it only once and had hoped never to do so again.

Lockhart bounded into the room and the class stared at him. Every other teacher in the place was looking grimmer than usual, but Lockhart appeared nothing short of buoyant.

“Come now,” he cried, beaming around him. “Why all these long faces?”

People swapped exasperated looks, but nobody answered.

“Don’t you people realize,” said Lockhart, speaking slowly, as though they were all a bit dim, “the danger has passed! The culprit has been taken away —”

“Says who?” said Dean Thomas loudly.

“My dear young man, the Minister of Magic wouldn’t have taken Hagrid if he hadn’t been one hundred percent sure that he was guilty,” said Lockhart, in the tone of someone explaining that one and one made two.

“Oh, yes he would,” said Ron, even more loudly than Dean.

“I flatter myself I know a *touch* more about Hagrid’s arrest than you do, Mr. Weasley,” said Lockhart in a self-satisfied tone.

Ron started to say that he didn’t think so, somehow, but stopped in midsentence when Harry kicked him hard under the desk.

“We weren’t there, remember?” Harry muttered.

But Lockhart’s disgusting cheeriness, his hints that he had always thought Hagrid was no good, his confidence that the whole business was now at an end, irritated Harry so much that he yearned to throw *Gadding with Ghouls* right in Lockhart’s stupid face. Instead he contented himself with scrawling a note to Ron: *Let’s do it tonight.*

Ron read the message, swallowed hard, and looked sideways at the empty seat usually filled by Hermione. The sight seemed to stiffen his resolve, and he nodded.

The Gryffindor common room was always very crowded these days, because from six o'clock onward the Gryffindors had nowhere else to go. They also had plenty to talk about, with the result that the common room often didn't empty until past midnight.

Harry went to get the Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk right after dinner, and spent the evening sitting on it, waiting for the room to clear. Fred and George challenged Harry and Ron to a few games of Exploding Snap, and Ginny sat watching them, very subdued in Hermione's usual chair. Harry and Ron kept losing on purpose, trying to finish the games quickly, but even so, it was well past midnight when Fred, George, and Ginny finally went to bed.

Harry and Ron waited for the distant sounds of two dormitory doors closing before seizing the Cloak, throwing it over themselves, and climbing through the portrait hole.

It was another difficult journey through the castle, dodging all the teachers. At last they reached the entrance hall, slid back the lock on the oak front doors, squeezed between them, trying to stop any creaking, and stepped out into the moonlit grounds.

"Course," said Ron abruptly as they strode across the black grass, "we might get to the forest and find there's nothing to follow. Those spiders might not've been going there at all. I know it looked like they were moving in that sort of general direction, but . . ."

His voice trailed away hopefully.

They reached Hagrid's house, sad and sorry-looking with its blank windows. When Harry pushed the door open, Fang went mad with joy at the sight of them. Worried he might wake everyone at the castle with his deep, booming barks, they hastily fed him treacle toffee from a tin on the mantelpiece, which glued his teeth together.

Harry left the Invisibility Cloak on Hagrid's table. There would be no need for it in the pitch-dark forest.

"C'mon, Fang, we're going for a walk," said Harry, patting his leg, and Fang bounded happily out of the house behind them, dashed to the edge of the forest, and lifted his leg against a large sycamore tree.

Harry took out his wand, murmured, "*Lumos!*" and a tiny light appeared at the end of it, just enough to let them watch the path for signs of spiders.

"Good thinking," said Ron. "I'd light mine, too, but you know — it'd probably blow up or something. . . ."

Harry tapped Ron on the shoulder, pointing at the grass. Two solitary spiders were hurrying away from the wandlight into the shade of the trees.

"Okay," Ron sighed as though resigned to the worst, "I'm ready. Let's go."

So, with Fang scampering around them, sniffing tree roots and leaves, they entered the forest. By the glow of Harry's wand, they followed the steady trickle of spiders moving along the path. They walked behind them for about twenty minutes, not speaking, listening hard for noises other than breaking twigs and rustling leaves. Then, when the trees had become thicker than ever, so that the stars overhead were no longer visible, and Harry's wand shone alone in

the sea of dark, they saw their spider guides leaving the path.

Harry paused, trying to see where the spiders were going, but everything outside his little sphere of light was pitch-black. He had never been this deep into the forest before. He could vividly remember Hagrid advising him not to leave the forest path last time he'd been in here. But Hagrid was miles away now, probably sitting in a cell in Azkaban, and he had also said to follow the spiders.

Something wet touched Harry's hand and he jumped backward, crushing Ron's foot, but it was only Fang's nose.

"What d'you reckon?" Harry said to Ron, whose eyes he could just make out, reflecting the light from his wand.

"We've come this far," said Ron.

So they followed the darting shadows of the spiders into the trees. They couldn't move very quickly now; there were tree roots and stumps in their way, barely visible in the near blackness. Harry could feel Fang's hot breath on his hand. More than once, they had to stop, so that Harry could crouch down and find the spiders in the wandlight.

They walked for what seemed like at least half an hour, their robes snagging on low-slung branches and brambles. After a while, they noticed that the ground seemed to be sloping downward, though the trees were as thick as ever.

Then Fang suddenly let loose a great, echoing bark, making both Harry and Ron jump out of their skins.

"What?" said Ron loudly, looking around into the pitch-dark, and gripping Harry's elbow very hard.

"There's something moving over there," Harry breathed.

“Listen . . . sounds like something big. . . .”

They listened. Some distance to their right, the something big was snapping branches as it carved a path through the trees.

“Oh, no,” said Ron. “Oh, no, oh, no, oh —”

“Shut up,” said Harry frantically. “It’ll hear you.”

“Hear *me*?” said Ron in an unnaturally high voice. “It’s already heard Fang!”

The darkness seemed to be pressing on their eyeballs as they stood, terrified, waiting. There was a strange rumbling noise and then silence.

“What d’you think it’s doing?” said Harry.

“Probably getting ready to pounce,” said Ron.

They waited, shivering, hardly daring to move.

“D’you think it’s gone?” Harry whispered.

“Dunno —”

Then, to their right, came a sudden blaze of light, so bright in the darkness that both of them flung up their hands to shield their eyes. Fang yelped and tried to run, but got lodged in a tangle of thorns and yelped even louder.

“Harry!” Ron shouted, his voice breaking with relief. “Harry, it’s our car!”

“*What?*”

“Come on!”

Harry blundered after Ron toward the light, stumbling and tripping, and a moment later they had emerged into a clearing.

Mr. Weasley’s car was standing, empty, in the middle of a circle of

thick trees under a roof of dense branches, its headlights ablaze. As Ron walked, openmouthed, toward it, it moved slowly toward him, exactly like a large, turquoise dog greeting its owner.

“It’s been here all the time!” said Ron delightedly, walking around the car. “Look at it. The forest’s turned it wild. . . .”

The sides of the car were scratched and smeared with mud. Apparently it had taken to trundling around the forest on its own. Fang didn’t seem at all keen on it; he kept close to Harry, who could feel him quivering. His breathing slowing down again, Harry stuffed his wand back into his robes.

“And we thought it was going to attack us!” said Ron, leaning against the car and patting it. “I wondered where it had gone!”

Harry squinted around on the floodlit ground for signs of more spiders, but they had all scuttled away from the glare of the headlights.

“We’ve lost the trail,” he said. “C’mon, let’s go and find them.”

Ron didn’t speak. He didn’t move. His eyes were fixed on a point some ten feet above the forest floor, right behind Harry. His face was livid with terror.

Harry didn’t even have time to turn around. There was a loud clicking noise and suddenly he felt something long and hairy seize him around the middle and lift him off the ground, so that he was hanging facedown. Struggling, terrified, he heard more clicking, and saw Ron’s legs leave the ground, too, heard Fang whimpering and howling — next moment, he was being swept away into the dark trees.

Head hanging, Harry saw that what had hold of him was marching

on six immensely long, hairy legs, the front two clutching him tightly below a pair of shining black pincers. Behind him, he could hear another of the creatures, no doubt carrying Ron. They were moving into the very heart of the forest. Harry could hear Fang fighting to free himself from a third monster, whining loudly, but Harry couldn't have yelled even if he had wanted to; he seemed to have left his voice back with the car in the clearing.

He never knew how long he was in the creature's clutches; he only knew that the darkness suddenly lifted enough for him to see that the leaf-strewn ground was now swarming with spiders. Craning his neck sideways, he realized that they had reached the ridge of a vast hollow, a hollow that had been cleared of trees, so that the stars shone brightly onto the worst scene he had ever laid eyes on.

Spiders. Not tiny spiders like those surging over the leaves below. Spiders the size of carthorses, eight-eyed, eight-legged, black, hairy, gigantic. The massive specimen that was carrying Harry made its way down the steep slope toward a misty, domed web in the very center of the hollow, while its fellows closed in all around it, clicking their pincers excitedly at the sight of its load.

Harry fell to the ground on all fours as the spider released him. Ron and Fang thudded down next to him. Fang wasn't howling anymore, but cowering silently on the spot. Ron looked exactly like Harry felt. His mouth was stretched wide in a kind of silent scream and his eyes were popping.

Harry suddenly realized that the spider that had dropped him was saying something. It had been hard to tell, because he clicked his pincers with every word he spoke.

“Aragog!” it called. “Aragog!”

And from the middle of the misty, domed web, a spider the size of a small elephant emerged, very slowly. There was gray in the black of his body and legs, and each of the eyes on his ugly, pincered head was milky white. He was blind.

“What is it?” he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

“Men,” clicked the spider who had caught Harry.

“Is it Hagrid?” said Aragog, moving closer, his eight milky eyes wandering vaguely.

“Strangers,” clicked the spider who had brought Ron.

“Kill them,” clicked Aragog fretfully. “I was sleeping. . . .”

“We’re friends of Hagrid’s,” Harry shouted. His heart seemed to have left his chest to pound in his throat.

Click, click, click went the pincers of the spiders all around the hollow.

Aragog paused.

“Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before,” he said slowly.

“Hagrid’s in trouble,” said Harry, breathing very fast. “That’s why we’ve come.”

“In trouble?” said the aged spider, and Harry thought he heard concern beneath the clicking pincers. “But why has he sent you?”

Harry thought of getting to his feet but decided against it; he didn’t think his legs would support him. So he spoke from the ground, as calmly as he could.

“They think, up at the school, that Hagrid’s been setting a — a —

something on students. They've taken him to Azkaban."

Aragog clicked his pincers furiously, and all around the hollow the sound was echoed by the crowd of spiders; it was like applause, except applause didn't usually make Harry feel sick with fear.

"But that was years ago," said Aragog fretfully. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That's why they made him leave the school. They believed that *I* was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

"And you . . . you didn't come from the Chamber of Secrets?" said Harry, who could feel cold sweat on his forehead.

"I!" said Aragog, clicking angrily. "I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg. Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid's goodness. . . ."

Harry summoned what remained of his courage.

"So you never — never attacked anyone?"

"Never," croaked the old spider. "It would have been my instinct, but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a bathroom. I never saw any part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet. . . ."

“But then . . . Do you know what *did* kill that girl?” said Harry. “Because whatever it is, it’s back and attacking people again —”

His words were drowned by a loud outbreak of clicking and the rustling of many long legs shifting angrily; large black shapes shifted all around him.

“The thing that lives in the castle,” said Aragog, “is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others. Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast moving about the school.”

“What is it?” said Harry urgently.

More loud clicking, more rustling; the spiders seemed to be closing in.

“We do not speak of it!” said Aragog fiercely. “We do not name it! I never even told Hagrid the name of that dread creature, though he asked me, many times.”

Harry didn’t want to press the subject, not with the spiders pressing closer on all sides. Aragog seemed to be tired of talking. He was backing slowly into his domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch slowly toward Harry and Ron.

“We’ll just go, then,” Harry called desperately to Aragog, hearing leaves rustling behind him.

“Go?” said Aragog slowly. “I think not. . . .”

“But — but —”

“My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid, on my command. But I cannot deny them fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our midst. Good-bye, friend of Hagrid.”

Harry spun around. Feet away, towering above him, was a solid

wall of spiders, clicking, their many eyes gleaming in their ugly black heads.

Even as he reached for his wand, Harry knew it was no good, there were too many of them, but as he tried to stand, ready to die fighting, a loud, long note sounded, and a blaze of light flamed through the hollow.

Mr. Weasley's car was thundering down the slope, headlights glaring, its horn screeching, knocking spiders aside; several were thrown onto their backs, their endless legs waving in the air. The car screeched to a halt in front of Harry and Ron and the doors flew open.

"Get Fang!" Harry yelled, diving into the front seat; Ron seized the boarhound around the middle and threw him, yelping, into the back of the car — the doors slammed shut — Ron didn't touch the accelerator but the car didn't need him; the engine roared and they were off, hitting more spiders. They sped up the slope, out of the hollow, and they were soon crashing through the forest, branches whipping the windows as the car wound its way cleverly through the widest gaps, following a path it obviously knew.

Harry looked sideways at Ron. His mouth was still open in the silent scream, but his eyes weren't popping anymore.

"Are you okay?"

Ron stared straight ahead, unable to speak.

They smashed their way through the undergrowth, Fang howling loudly in the back seat, and Harry saw the side mirror snap off as they squeezed past a large oak. After ten noisy, rocky minutes, the trees thinned, and Harry could again see patches of sky.

The car stopped so suddenly that they were nearly thrown into the windshield. They had reached the edge of the forest. Fang flung himself at the window in his anxiety to get out, and when Harry opened the door, he shot off through the trees to Hagrid's house, tail between his legs. Harry got out too, and after a minute or so, Ron seemed to regain the feeling in his limbs and followed, still stiff-necked and staring. Harry gave the car a grateful pat as it reversed back into the forest and disappeared from view.

Harry went back into Hagrid's cabin to get the Invisibility Cloak. Fang was trembling under a blanket in his basket. When Harry got outside again, he found Ron being violently sick in the pumpkin patch.

"Follow the spiders," said Ron weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'll never forgive Hagrid. We're lucky to be alive."

"I bet he thought Aragog wouldn't hurt friends of his," said Harry.

"That's exactly Hagrid's problem!" said Ron, thumping the wall of the cabin. "He always thinks monsters aren't as bad as they're made out, and look where it's got him! A cell in Azkaban!" He was shivering uncontrollably now. "What was the point of sending us in there? What have we found out, I'd like to know?"

"That Hagrid never opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Harry, throwing the Cloak over Ron and prodding him in the arm to make him walk. "He was innocent."

Ron gave a loud snort. Evidently, hatching Aragog in a cupboard wasn't his idea of being innocent.

As the castle loomed nearer Harry twitched the Cloak to make sure their feet were hidden, then pushed the creaking front doors ajar.

They walked carefully back across the entrance hall and up the marble staircase, holding their breath as they passed corridors where watchful sentries were walking. At last they reached the safety of the Gryffindor common room, where the fire had burned itself into glowing ash. They took off the Cloak and climbed the winding stair to their dormitory.

Ron fell onto his bed without bothering to get undressed. Harry, however, didn't feel very sleepy. He sat on the edge of his four-poster, thinking hard about everything Aragog had said.

The creature that was lurking somewhere in the castle, he thought, sounded like a sort of monster Voldemort — even other monsters didn't want to name it. But he and Ron were no closer to finding out what it was, or how it Petrified its victims. Even Hagrid had never known what was in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry swung his legs up onto his bed and leaned back against his pillows, watching the moon glinting at him through the tower window.

He couldn't see what else they could do. They had hit dead ends everywhere. Riddle had caught the wrong person, the Heir of Slytherin had got off, and no one could tell whether it was the same person, or a different one, who had opened the Chamber this time. There was nobody else to ask. Harry lay down, still thinking about what Aragog had said.

He was becoming drowsy when what seemed like their very last hope occurred to him, and he suddenly sat bolt upright.

“Ron,” he hissed through the dark, “Ron —”

Ron woke with a yelp like Fang's, stared wildly around, and saw

Harry.

“Ron — that girl who died. Aragog said she was found in a bathroom,” said Harry, ignoring Neville’s snuffling snores from the corner. “What if she never left the bathroom? What if she’s still there?”

Ron rubbed his eyes, frowning through the moonlight. And then he understood, too.

“You *don’t* think — not *Moaning Myrtle*?”

Aragog

Somer is besig om oor die kasteel se tuine te kruip; die lug en die meer is bloukappieblou en blomme so groot soos kopkole groei in die kweekhuise. Met geen Hagrid sigbaar deur die kasteel se vensters waar hy oor die terrein stap met Tande op sy hakke nie, lyk die toneel vir Harry glad nie reg nie; om die waarheid te sê, niks beter as die binnekant van die kasteel waar alles so aaklig verkeerd loop nie.

Harry en Ron het probeer om Hermien te besoek, maar besoekers word nie meer in die siekeboeg toegelaat nie.

“Ons waag net nie meer kanse nie,” sê Madame Pomfrey streng deur ’n skreef in die siekeboeg se deur. “Nee, ek is jammer, daar is ’n moontlikheid dat die aanvaller terug kan kom om hierdie mense te vermoor . . .”

Vandat Dompeldorius weg is, het vrees soos nog nooit tevore nie deur die kasteel versprei, sodat dit selfs voel of die son, wat die kasteelmure van buite af warm bak, nie deur die ruite kan dring nie. Daar is kwalik ’n gesig in die skool wat nie bekommerd en gespanne lyk nie en enige gelag wat dalk in die gange gehoor word, klink skril en vals en van korte duur.

Harry herhaal Dompeldorius se laaste woorde gedurig vir homself. “Julle sal vind dat ek die skool alleenlik werklik verlaat het wanneer niemand meer lojaal is teenoor my nie. In Hogwarts word altyd hulp gegee aan diegene wat daarvoor vra.” Maar van watter nut is hierdie woorde? Vir wie kan hulle om hulp vra as almal net so verward en bang soos hulle is?

Hagrid se wenk oor die spinnekoppe is baie makliker om te verstaan – die probleem is net dat daar nie meer ’n enkele spinnekop in die kasteel is om te volg nie. Harry kyk oral waar hy gaan, bygestaan (redelik onwillig) deur Ron. Hulle word gekortwiek deur die feit dat hulle nie op hul eie mag rondloop nie, maar oral in die kasteel saam met die ander Griffindors moet beweeg. Die meeste van die ander studente lyk of hulle heeltemal tevrede daarmee is om oral deur onderwysers begelei te word, maar Harry dink dis bitter lastig.

Daar is egter een persoon wat die atmosfeer van angs en agterdog terdeë geniet. Draco Malfoy loop pronk-pronk in die skool rond, asof hy so pas tot hoofseun verkies is. Harry kon nie verstaan waarom hy so in sy

noppies is nie, tot een Towerdrankie-klas, omtrent twee weke na Dompeldorius en Hagrid weg is, toe Harry agter Malfoy sit en hoor hoe hy teenoor Krabbe en Goliat spog.

“Ek het nog altyd gedink my pa gaan van Dompeldorius ontslae raak,” sê hy en hy probeer nie eens om sy stem laag te hou nie. “Ek het mos vir julle gesê hy dink Dompeldorius is die swakste skoolhoof wat die skool nog gehad het. Hopelik kry ons nou ’n ordentlike hoof. Iemand wat wil hê dat die Kamer van Geheimenisse oop moet wees. McGonagall sal nie lank hou nie, sy staan net in . . .”

Snerp swiep verby Harry, sonder om ’n woord oor Hermien se leë sitplek en hekseketel te sê.

“Professor,” sê Malfoy hard. “Hoekom doen u nie aansoek vir die skoolhoof se pos nie?”

“Toe nou, Malfoy,” sê Snerp, hoewel hy ’n dunlippige glimlaggie nie kan keer nie. “Professor Dompeldorius se dienste is net tydelik opgeskort deur die bestuursraad. Ek is seker hy sal binnekort terug wees.”

“H’m, ja,” sê Malfoy en grinnik. “Ek is seker my pa sal vir u stem as u aansoek sou doen. Ek sal vir my pa sê dat u die beste onderwyser op Hogwarts is . . .”

Snerp grimlag toe hy deur die kerker swiep. Hy sien gelukkig nie hoe Septimus Floris maak of hy in sy hekseketel opgooi nie.

“Ek is verbaas dat al die Modderbloeders nog nie hul tasse gepak het nie,” gaan Malfoy voort. “Ek wed julle vyf Galjoene dat die volgende een dood sal wees. Net jammer dis nie La Grange nie . . .”

Op daardie oomblik lui die klok, wat ’n geluk is, want met Malfoy se laaste woorde het Ron van sy stoel af opgespring, maar in die geskarrel om boeke bymekaar te maak en tasse te pak, sien niemand hoe hy probeer om by Malfoy te kom nie.

“Los my,” grom Ron terwyl Harry en Dean aan sy arms hang. “Ek gee nie om nie, ek het nie ’n towerstaf nodig nie, ek sal hom met my kaal hande verwurg –”

“Opskud, opskud, ek moet julle die hele ent pad na die Herbologie-klas neem,” blaf Snerp oor die klas se koppe en hulle stap aan, soos ’n lang krokodil, met Harry, Ron en Dean heel agter, terwyl Ron nog steeds sukkel om los te ruk. Dis eers veilig om hom te laat gaan toe Snerp hulle buite die kasteel los, en hulle verby die groentetuin na die kweekhuise stap.

Die Herbologie-klas is baie stil; twee lede van die klas is aangerand, Justin en Hermien.

Professor Spruit laat hulle die Abessiniese Krimpyve snoei. Toe Harry ’n arm vol droë stele op die komposhoop gaan gooi, bevind hy homself van aangesig tot aangesig met Ernie Macmillan. Ernie haal ’n slag diep asem, toe sê hy plegtig, “Ek wil net sê, Harry, ek is baie jammer dat ek

jou verdink het. Ek weet jy sal nooit vir Hermien la Grange aanval nie en ek vra verskoning vir alles wat ek gesê het. Ons is nou almal in dieselfde bootjie, en, wel –”

Hy steek 'n pofferhand uit en Harry skud dit.

Ernie en sy vriendin Hanna kom werk aan dieselfde Krimpvly as Harry en Ron.

“Daardie Draco Malfoy-skepsel,” sê Ernie terwyl hy 'n paar dooie takkies afbreek, “lyk omtrent in sy skik met alles, of hoe? Weet julle wat, ek dink hy is Slibberin se Erfgenaam.”

“Dis slim van jou,” sê Ron, wat lyk of hy nie vir Ernie so maklik gaan vergewe soos Harry nie.

“Dink jy dis Malfoy, Harry?” vra Ernie.

“Nee,” sê Harry, so beslis dat Ernie en Hanna na hom staar.

'n Oomblik later sien Harry iets wat veroorsaak dat hy vir Ron met sy snoeiskêr oor die kneukels raps.

“Eina! Wat maak jy –”

Harry wys na die grond 'n paar tree van hulle af. 'n Hele klomp groot spinnekoppe skarrel oor die grond.

“H'm, ja,” sê Ron en probeer hard om in sy skik te lyk. “Maar ons kan nie nou agter hulle aan . . .”

Ernie en Hanna staan nuuskierig en luister.

Harry kyk hoe die spinnekoppe wegskarrel.

“Lyk of hulle na die Verbode Woud gaan . . .”

Dit laat Ron nog meer ongelukkig lyk.

Teen die einde van die les vergesel professor Spruit die studente na die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-klas. Harry en Ron drentel 'n entjie agterna sodat niemand kan hoor wat hulle sê nie.

“Ons sal die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weer moet gebruik,” sê Harry vir Ron. “Ons kan vir Tande saamneem. Hy's gewoon daaraan om saam met Hagrid bos toe te gaan, hy kan dalk help.”

“Reg,” sê Ron en draai sy towerstaf senuagtig tussen sy vingers rond. “H'm – daar is nie – daar's nie dalk weerwolwe in die Woud nie?” voeg hy by toe hulle op hul gewone plekke agter in Lockhart se klas gaan sit.

Harry verkies om hierdie vraag nie te beantwoord nie en sê, “Daar is goeie goed ook. Die sentours is heeltemal gaaf en die eenhorings ook.”

Ron was nog nooit tevore in die Verbode Woud nie. Harry was nog net een keer daar en hy het gehoop dat hy dit nooit weer hoef te doen nie.

Lockhart trippel die vertrek binne en die klas gaap hom aan. Al die ander onderwysers lyk nog grimmiger as gewoonlik, maar Lockhart lyk sowaar opgeruimd.

“Kom, kom,” roep hy uit en kyk stralend in die rondte, “hoekom die lang gesigte?”

Mense kyk verslae na mekaar, maar niemand antwoord nie.

“Besef julle mense nie,” sê Lockhart en hy praat baie stadig, asof hulle ’n bietjie aan die dom kant is, “dat die gevaar verby is nie? Die skuldige is weggeneem.”

“Sê wie?” sê Dean Thomas hard.

“My liewe jonge man, die Minister van Towerkuns sou nie vir Hagrid verwyder het as hy nie eenhonderd persent seker was dat Hagrid skuldig is nie,” sê Lockhart, soos iemand wat moet verduidelik dat een en een twee is.

“O, ja, hy sou,” sê Ron, selfs harder as Dean.

“Ek vlei myself dat ek ’n *ietsie-bietsie* meer van Hagrid se arrestasie weet as jy, mnr. Weasley,” sê Lockhart in ’n selftevrede stem.

Ron begin sê dat hy nogal nie so dink nie, maar breek in die helfte van die sin af, want Harry skop hom hard onder die tafel.

“Ons was nie daar nie, onthou,” mompel Harry.

Lockhart se walglike vrolikheid, sy skimpe dat hy nog altyd geweet het dat daar niks goeds in Hagrid steek nie, sy oormatige vertroue dat alles nou oor is, irriteer Harry so erg dat hy lus is om *Manewales met Monsters* vol in Lockhart se dom gesig te gooi. Pleks daarvan skryf hy ’n nota aan Ron: “*Vanaand is die aand.*”

Ron lees die boodskap, sluk swaar en kyk sydelings na die leë sitplek waar Hermien altyd sit. Dis of dit hom moed gee, want hy knik.

Die laaste tyd is die Griffindor-geselskamer altyd baie vol, want van sesuur af het die Griffindors nêrens anders om te gaan nie. Hulle het ook baie om oor te praat, met die gevolg dat die vertrek selde voor middernag leeg is.

Na aandete gaan haal Harry die Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit sy trommel. Die hele aand sit hy daarop en wag dat die kamer moet leegloop. Fred en George het Harry en Ron uitgedaag vir ’n paar potte Ontplofvreetkaart en ’n baie bedeesde Ginny sit in Hermien se stoel en kyk. Harry en Ron verloor aanmekaar aspris omdat hulle wil klaarkry, maar dis nog steeds na middernag voor Fred, George en Ginny uiteindelik bed toe gaan.

Harry en Ron wag vir die veraf geluid van die twee slaapsale se deure om toe te gaan, voor hulle die mantel gryp, oor hulself gooi en deur die portretopening klim.

Dit is weer eens ’n moeilike taak om deur die kasteel te stap en al die onderwysers te vermy. Uiteindelik bereik hulle die Ingangsportaal waar hulle, sonder om ’n geluidjie te maak, die skuiwer voor die groot eikehoutdeure terugskuif en buitentoe glip, tot in die maanverligte tuine. “Dit kan natuurlik gebeur,” sê Ron skielik toe hulle oor die swart gras stap, “dat ons by die woud kom en sien dat daar niks is om te volg nie. Dalk gaan daardie spinnekoppe glad nie eens soontoe nie. Ek weet dit het gelyk of hulle soontoe loop, maar . . .”

Sy stem raak weg, maar hy klink hoopvol.

Hagrid se huis lyk verlate en droewig met sy leë, donker ruite. Toe Harry die deur oopstoot, is Tande buite homself van blydschap om hulle te sien. Omdat hulle bang is dat iemand in die kasteel sal wakker word van sy bulderende geblaf, gee hulle hom gou van die tameletjie wat in 'n blik op die kaggelrak staan om sy tande aanmekaar te plak.

Harry los die Onsigbaarheidsmantel op Hagrid se tafel. Hulle sal dit nie in die donker woud nodig hê nie.

“Komaan, Tande, kom ons gaan stap.” Harry klap-klap teen sy been en Tande storm dolgelukkig uit die huis en agter hulle aan. Hy laat vat na die kant van die woud en lig sy been teen 'n groot wildevyboom.

Harry haal sy towerstaf uit, mompel, “*Lumos!*” en 'n klein liggie verskyn aan die punt, net genoeg sodat hulle in die pad voor hulle na spinnekoppe kan soek.

“Goeie plan,” sê Ron. “Ek kan myne ook aansteek, maar jy weet tog self – dit sal seker opblaas, of iets . . .”

Harry tik vir Ron op die skouer en wys na die gras. Twee spinnekoppe skarrel uit die lig en pyl af op die bome se skaduwees.

“Goed,” sê Ron met 'n sug, soos een wat die ergste verwag, “ek is gereed. Kom ons loop.”

Met Tande wat al om hulle draf en aan die boomwortels en blare ruik, stap hulle die woud binne. Met behulp van die lig van Harry se towerstaf volg hulle die spinnekoppe wat met die paadjie langs skarrel. Vir 'n goeie twintig minute loop hulle sonder om te praat terwyl hulle luister of hulle ander geluide as krakende takkies en ritselende blare kan hoor. Toe die bome al digter raak, sodat die sterre verdwyn en Harry se towerstaf die enigste liggie in 'n see van duisternis is, sien hulle hoe hul spinnekopgidse die paadjie verlaat.

Harry gaan staan. Hy probeer sien waarheen die spinnekoppe gaan, maar alles buite die klein kolletjie lig is pikdonker. Hy was nog nooit tevore so diep in die woud nie. Hy onthou goed dat Hagrid die vorige keer gesê het hy moet in die pad bly. Maar Hagrid is kilometers ver, heel waarskynlik in 'n sel in Azkaban, maar hy het ook gesê dat hulle die spinnekoppe moet volg.

Iets nats raak aan Harry se hand. Hy spring terug en trap hard op Ron se voet, maar dis net Tande se neus.

“Wat dink jy?” sê Harry vir Ron, wie se oë hy net-net in die lig van die towerstaf kan sien.

“Ons het ver gekom,” sê Ron.

Toe volg hulle die dartelende skaduwees wat die spinnekoppe tussen die bome maak. Hulle kan nie meer vinnig stap nie; daar is boomwortels en stompe wat feitlik onsigbaar in die amperse duisternis is. Harry voel Tande se warm asem teen sy hand. Meer as een keer moet hulle stop

sodat Harry kan hurk om die spinnekoppe met die towerstaf se liggie te soek.

Vir ten minste 'n halfuur stap hulle aan. Hul klere haak aan lae takke en braambosse. Dan merk hulle dat die grond afwaarts hel, hoewel die bome nog net so dig soos tevore staan.

Meteens blaf Tande weergalmend sodat sowel Harry as Ron van skrik amper uit hul velle spring.

“Wat is dit?” sê Ron, terwyl hy wild in die pikdonkerte rondkyk en Harry hard aan die elmboog gryp.

“Daar beweeg iets daar voor,” sê Harry ademloos. “Luister . . . Klink na iets groots.”

Hulle luister. 'n Ent na regs is die iets besig om met 'n gekraak van takke 'n pad deur die bome te breek.

“O, nee,” sê Ron. “O, nee, o nee, o –”

“Hou jou snater,” sê Harry benoud. “Die ding sal jou hoor.”

“My hoor?” sê Ron in 'n hoë stemmetjie. “Dit het klaar gehoor. Tande!”

Dis of die donkerte teen hul oogballe druk soos hulle daar staan en wag – tot die dood toe bang. Hulle hoor 'n vreemde rammelende geluid en toe is dit stil.

“Wat dink jy doen dit?” sê Harry.

“Maak seker reg om te spring,” sê Ron.

Hulle wag bewend; hulle waag dit nie om te roer nie.

“Dink jy dis weg?” fluister Harry.

“Weet nie –”

Toe, net regs van hulle, verskyn 'n skielike gloed van lig, so helder in die duisternis dat hulle hul hande voor hul oë gooi om hul oë te beskerm. Tande tjank en probeer weghardloop, maar draai hom vas in 'n massa dorings wat hom nog harder laat tjank.

“Harry!” gil Ron en sy stem breek omtrent van verligting. “Harry, dis ons motor!”

“Wat?”

“Komaan!”

Harry strompel agter Ron aan in die rigting van die lig. Hulle struikel en val amper en 'n oomblik later staan hulle in 'n groterige oop kol.

Mnr. Weasley se motor staan in die middel van 'n kring bome onder 'n dak van digte takke, en al sy ligte brand. Toe Ron met 'n oop mond nader stap, kom dit stadig nader, baie soos 'n groot turkoois hond wat sy baas kom groet.

“So dis nog die hele tyd hier!” sê Ron verheug, terwyl hy om die motor stap. “Kyk net. Dit het halfwild geword hier in die bos . . .”

Die kante van die motor is geskraap en met modder besmeer. Dis duidelik dat dit alleen in die bos rondgedwaal het. Tande lyk nie in sy skik

nie; hy bly styf aan Harry se sy en Harry kan voel hoe hy bewee. Harry, wie se asem nou stadiger kom, druk sy towerstaf terug in sy kleed.

“En ons dag dit wil ons aanval!” sê Ron terwyl hy teen die motor leun en dit streef. “Ek het gewonder wat van die kar geword het!”

Harry loer oral op die helderverligte grond rond vir tekens van nog spinnekoppe, maar hulle het almal weggeskarrel om uit die gloed van die hoofligte te kom.

“Ons het die spoor verloor,” sê hy. “Kom, ons moet hulle gaan soek.”

Ron antwoord nie. Hy roer nie. Sy oë is vasgenaai op ’n plek so ’n stuk of drie meter bo die woud se vloer, reg agter Harry. Sy gesig is vertrek van vrees.

Harry het nie eens kans om om te draai nie. Hy hoor ’n harde klikgeluid en toe voel hy hoe iets wat lank en harig is hom om die middel gryp en van die grond af lig, sodat hy kop onderstebo in die lug hang. Hy spartel; hy is tot die dood toe bang; hy hoor nog klikgeluide en sien hoe Ron ook die lug in gehys word; hoor hoe Tande kerm en tjank – en die volgende oomblik word hy tussen die donker bome ingedra.

Nou eers sien Harry dat dit wat hom beet het, ses ongelooflike lang, harige bene het waarvan die voorste twee hom vashou, reg onder ’n paar blink swart knypers. Agter hom hoor hy nog van die gediertes – seker met Ron in hul kloue. Hulle beweeg na die hart van die woud. Harry hoor hoe Tande baklei om los te kom en kermend tjank. Harry kan nie skree nie, selfs al wil hy ook; dis of sy stem in die oopte by die motor agtergebly het.

Hy sal nooit weet hoe lank hy in die ondier se kloue was nie; hy weet net dat die donkerte skielik lig, net genoeg sodat hy kan sien dat die blaarbedekte grond krioel van spinnekoppe. Hy draai sy kop na die kant en merk dat hulle aan die rand van ’n groot krater is; ’n krater waarin geen bome groei nie, sodat die sterre daar bo helder skyn op die aakligste toneel wat hy nog ooit gesien het.

Spinnekoppe. Nie klein spinnekoppies soos die wat oor die blare geskarrel het nie. Spinnekoppe so groot soos perdekarre: swart, harig en reusagtig groot. Die massiewe spinnekop wat vir Harry dra, beweeg af teen die steil helling na ’n mistige, ronde web in die middel van die krater. Sy makkers kom nader en nader. Hulle klik hul knypers opgewonde toe hulle sien wat hy dra.

Harry val hande-viervoet op die grond toe die spinnekop hom los. Ron en Tande plof langs hom neer. Tande tjank nie meer nie. Hy krimp bewend ineen. Ron lyk presies net soos Harry voel. Sy mond is wydgerok in ’n soort geluidlose kreet en sy oë peul uit.

Harry besef skielik dat die spinnekop wat hom laat val het, iets sê. Dis moeilik om dit uit te maak, want hy klik sy knypers met elke woord wat hy sê.

“Aragog!” roep hy. “Aragog!”

Vanuit die middel van die mistige, ronde web kom ’n spinnekop so groot soos ’n jong olifant stadig nader. Daar is gryns hare op sy swart liggaam en bene en elk van die oë op sy aaklige kop is melkwy. Hy is blind.

“Wat is dit?” vra hy en klik sy knypers vinnig na mekaar.

“Mense,” klik die spinnekop wat vir Harry gevang het.

“Is dit Hagrid?” sê Aragog en beweeg nader, terwyl sy agt melkerige oë oor hulle dwaal.

“Vreemdelinge,” klik die spinnekop wat vir Ron gebring het.

“Maak hulle dood,” klik Aragog prikkelbaar. “Ek het geslaap . . .”

“Ons is vriende van Hagrid,” skree Harry. Dis of sy hart nie meer in sy borskas is nie, maar iewers in sy keel klop.

Klik, klik, klik gaan die knypers van die spinnekoppe in die krater.

Aragog steek vas.

“Hagrid het nog nooit mense na ons krater gestuur nie,” sê hy stadig.

“Hagrid is in die moeilikheid,” sê Harry en sy asem jaag. “Dis hoekom ons gekom het.”

“In die moeilikheid?” vra die bejaarde spinnekop en dis of Harry iets soos kommer tussen die geklik van sy knypers deur hoor. “Maar waarom het hy julle gestuur?”

Harry oorweeg dit om op te staan, maar besluit daarteen; hy dink nie sy bene sal hom kan dra nie. So kalm as wat hy maar kan, praat hy van sy lêende posisie af.

“Hulle dink, daar in die skool, dat Hagrid ’n – ’n – ding op die studente gesit het. Hulle het hom na Azkaban geneem.”

Aragog klik sy knypers verwoed en die geluid word reg rondom die krater deur die ander spinnekoppe herhaal; dit klink amper soos die geklap van hande, behalwe dat ’n geklap van hande Harry nog nooit tevore siek van vrees gemaak het nie.

“Maar dit was jare gelede,” sê Aragog knieserig. “Jare en jare gelede. Ek onthou dit goed. Dis hoekom hulle hom gedwing het om die skool te verlaat. Hulle het gedink ek is die monster wat in die Kamer van Geheimenisse woon. Hulle het gedink Hagrid het die Kamer oopgemaak en my laat uitkom.”

“En u . . . u het nie uit die Kamer van Geheimenisse gekom nie?” sê Harry wat voel hoe die koue sweet op sy voorkop uitslaan.

“Ek!” sê Aragog en klik ergerlik. “Ek is nie in die kasteel gebore nie. Ek kom van ’n land ver van hier af. ’n Reisiger het my vir Hagrid gegee toe ek nog ’n eier was. Hagrid was ’n blote kind, maar hy het my versorg, my in ’n kas in die kasteel weggesteek en oorskiet van die tafel af gevoer. Hagrid is my vriend en ’n goeie mens. Toe hulle my ontdek het en vir die dood van ’n meisiekind blameer het, het hy my beskerm. Van toe af woon ek hier in die woud waar Hagrid my nou nog besoek. Hy het selfs vir my

'n vrou gevind, Mosag, en jy kan self sien hoe ons gesin gegroei het, alles deur Hagrid se goedhartigheid . . .”

Harry skraap sy laaste bietjie moed bymekaar.

“So u het nooit – nooit iemand aangeval nie?”

“Nooit,” kwaak die ou spinnekop. “Dit is wel my instink, maar uit respek vir Hagrid het ek ’n mens nog nooit kwaad aangedoen nie. Die liggaam van daardie kind wat doodgemaak is, is in ’n badkamer gekry. Ek was nooit in enige ander deel van die kasteel as die kas waarin ek grootgemaak is nie. Ons soort hou van donker, stil plekke . . .”

“Maar dan . . . Weet u *wat* daardie meisie vermoor het?” sê Harry. “Want wat dit ook al was; dis terug en dis weer besig om mense aan te val –”

Sy woorde word verbreek deur ’n harde geklik en die geritsel van honderde lang bene wat ergerlik beweeg. Groot swart gedaantes skuifel om hulle rond.

“Die ding wat in die kasteel woon,” sê Aragog, “is ’n eeue oue kreatuur waarvoor ons spinnekoppe tot die dood toe bang is. Ek onthou goed hoe ek vir Hagrid gesmeek het om my vry te laat toe ek besef het watter ondier in die skool rondbeweeg.”

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry dringend.

Nou is die geklik en geritsel harder; dis of die spinnekoppe al nader kom.

“Ons praat nie daaroor nie!” sê Aragog kwaai. “Ons gebruik nie die naam nie! Ek het nie eens vir Hagrid gesê wat daardie vreeslike ondier se naam is nie, hoewel hy my gereeld gevra het.”

Harry is te bang om verder uit te vra, veral met die spinnekoppe wat van alle kante nader en nader kom. Dit lyk of Aragog moeg gepraat is. Hy tree stadig terug tot in sy koepelvormige web, maar die ander spinnekoppe kom nog steeds nader aan Harry en Ron.

“Dan gaan ons maar,” roep Harry wanhopig agter Aragog aan toe hy die blare agter hom hoor ritsel.

“Gaan?” sê Aragog stadig. “Ek dink nie so nie . . .”

“Maar – maar –”

“My seuns en dogters sal niks aan Hagrid doen nie, op my bevel. Maar ek kan hulle vars vleis nie weier nie, veral nie as dit so gewilliglik in ons midde kom nie. Vaarwel, vriend van Hagrid.”

Harry tol om. Enkele meters van hom af staan ’n soliede muur van spinnekoppe. Hul klik hul knypers en hul oë glim in hul aaklige swart koppe . . .

Harry steek sy hand uit na sy towerstaf, maar hy weet dis tevergeefs; daar is te veel van hulle. Hy bly regop staan, gereed om al vegtende te sterf, maar op daardie oomblik hoor hy ’n lang, harde geluid en ’n gloed van lig vlam op in die krater.

Mnr. Weasley se motor storm brullend op hulle af. Sy hoofligte is vol aangeskakel, sy toeter blaas en hy stamp spinnekoppe links en regs uit die pad; 'n hele klomp val op hul rûe en bly skoppend lê. Reg voor Harry en Ron kom die motor met skreeuende bande tot stilstand en die deure vlieg oop.

“Kry vir Tande!” gil Harry, terwyl hy op die voorste sitplek duik; Ron gryp die beerhond om die lyf en gooi hom tjankend agter in die motor. Die deure slaan toe. Ron raak nie eens aan die petrolpedaal nie; die motor het hom nie nodig nie; die enjin brul en hulle jaag weg terwyl hulle nog spinnekoppe tref. Hulle jaag vinnig teen die kant van die krater uit en bars deur die woud, met takke wat teen die vensters skraap, terwyl die motor self op vindingryke manier sy pad deur die grootste gapings kies. Dis duidelik dat hy sy roete ken.

Harry loer sydelings na Ron. Ron se mond is nog steeds oop in 'n stille kreet, maar sy oë peul darem nie meer uit nie.

“Hoe voel jy?”

Ron staar voor hom. Hy kan nie praat nie.

Hulle jaag deur die kreupelbos met Tande wat luidkeels op die agterste sitplek tjank. Harry sien hoe die syspieëltjie afbreek toe hulle verby 'n groot eik skuur. Na 'n stuk of tien raserige, stamperige minute, word die bome minder en kan Harry weer hier en daar kolle lug sien.

Die motor hou so skielik stil dat hulle amper deur die voorruit gegooi word. Hulle het die rand van die woud bereik. Tande slinger homself teen die venster in sy gretigheid om uit te kom en toe Harry die deur oopmaak, skiet hy stert tussen die bene deur die bome na Hagrid se hut. Harry klim ook uit en na 'n paar oomblikke lyk dit of Ron ook beheer oor sy ledemate het. Hy klim uit, stywerig en starend. Harry gee die motor 'n dankbare klappie teen die bakwerk net voor dit agteruit begin ry en in die woud verdwyn.

Harry stap terug na Hagrid se hut om die Onsigbaarheidsmantel te gaan haal. Tande sit bewend onder 'n kombers in sy mandjie. Toe Harry weer buite kom, kry hy vir Ron aan 't opgooi in die pampoenakker.

“Volg die spinnekoppe,” sê Ron floutjies en vee sy mond aan sy mou af. “Ek sal Hagrid nooit vergewe nie. Ons kan ons sterre dank dat ons nog leef.”

“Ek wed hy't gedink Aragog sal niks aan sy vriende doen nie,” sê Harry.

“Dit is net mooi Hagrid se grootste probleem.” Ron slaan teen die muur van die hut. “Hy dink altyd monsters is nie so erg soos wat almal sê nie en kyk net wat het met hom gebeur? Hy sit in 'n sel in Azkaban!” Nou bewe hy onbeheerbaar. “Hoekom de dinges het hy ons daarheen gestuur? Wat het ons miskien uitgevind, vra ek jou?”

“Dat Hagrid nooit die Kamer van Geheimenisse oopgemaak het nie,”

sê Harry terwyl hy die kleed oor Ron gooi en hom teen die arm druk sodat hy moet begin stap. "Hy was onskuldig."

Ron gee 'n harde snork. Dis duidelik dat iemand wat vir Aragog in 'n donker kas laat uibroei het, nie in sy oë onskuldig is nie.

Toe die kasteel nader kom, pluk-pluk Harry aan die kleed om seker te maak dat hul voete nie uitsteek nie. Toe stoot hy die krakende voordeur oop. Hulle loop versigtig terug oor die Ingangsportaal en op met die marmertrappe, en hou hul asem op wanneer hulle in die gange afstap waar opletende wagte staan. Uiteindelik is hulle veilig in die Griffindor-geselskamer waar die vuur tot gloeiende as uitgebrand het. Hulle haal die kleed af en stap die wenteltrap op na hul slaapsaal.

Ron val op sy bed sonder om eens uit te trek. Harry voel egter nie baie vaak nie. Hy gaan sit op die kant van sy hemelbed en dink hard aan alles wat Aragog gesê het.

Die ondiervat iewers in die kasteel wegkruip, dink hy, klink soos 'n soort Woldemort-monster – selfs ander monsters wil nie sy naam gebruik nie. Maar hy en Ron weet nog steeds nie wat dit is of hoe dit sy slagoffers Versteen nie. Selfs Hagrid het nooit geweet wat in die Kamer van Geheimenisse was nie.

Harry swaai sy bene op die bed, leun terug teen sy kussings en kyk hoe die maan deur die toring se venster op hom skyn.

Hy weet nie wat hulle nog kan doen nie. Al die spore loop net eenvoudig dood. Dhoewels het die verkeerde persoon gevang, die Erfgenaam van Slibberin het weggekom en niemand weet of dit dieselfde persoon of iemand heel anders is wat die Kamer van Geheimenisse hierdie keer oopgemaak het nie. Daar is niemand vir wie hulle kan vra nie. Harry gaan lê, maar hy dink nog steeds aan wat Aragog gesê het.

Hy is op die punt om in te dommel toe iets hom skielik te binne skiet en hy penorent gaan sit. Dit voel soos hul heel laaste kans.

"Ron," fluister hy dringend in die donkerte. "Ron!"

Ron word wakker met 'n kreet wat baie soos Tande se getjank klink. Hy staar wild om hom rond en sien vir Harry.

"Ron – daardie meisiekind wat dood is. Aragog het gesê sy's in 'n badkamer gekry," sê Harry en steur hom nie aan Neville se snuiwende gesnork in die hoek nie. "Wat as sy nooit uit die badkamer gegaan het nie? Wat as sy nou nog daar is?"

Ron vryf sy oë en frons in die maanlig. Toe verstaan hy.

"Jy dink tog nie – nie Katryn Kermkous nie?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

All those times we were in that bathroom, and she was just three toilets away,” said Ron bitterly at breakfast next day, “and we could’ve asked her, and now . . .”

It had been hard enough trying to look for spiders. Escaping their teachers long enough to sneak into a girls’ bathroom, the girls’ bathroom, moreover, right next to the scene of the first attack, was going to be almost impossible.

But something happened in their first lesson, Transfiguration, that drove the Chamber of Secrets out of their minds for the first time in weeks. Ten minutes into the class, Professor McGonagall told them that their exams would start on the first of June, one week from today.

“*Exams?*” howled Seamus Finnigan. “We’re still getting *exams?*”

There was a loud bang behind Harry as Neville Longbottom’s wand slipped, vanishing one of the legs on his desk. Professor

McGonagall restored it with a wave of her own wand, and turned, frowning, to Seamus.

“The whole point of keeping the school open at this time is for you to receive your education,” she said sternly. “The exams will therefore take place as usual, and I trust you are all studying hard.”

Studying hard! It had never occurred to Harry that there would be exams with the castle in this state. There was a great deal of mutinous muttering around the room, which made Professor McGonagall scowl even more darkly.

“Professor Dumbledore’s instructions were to keep the school running as normally as possible,” she said. “And that, I need hardly point out, means finding out how much you have learned this year.”

Harry looked down at the pair of white rabbits he was supposed to be turning into slippers. What had he learned so far this year? He couldn’t seem to think of anything that would be useful in an exam.

Ron looked as though he’d just been told he had to go and live in the Forbidden Forest.

“Can you imagine me taking exams with this?” he asked Harry, holding up his wand, which had just started whistling loudly.

Three days before their first exam, Professor McGonagall made another announcement at breakfast.

“I have good news,” she said, and the Great Hall, instead of falling silent, erupted.

“Dumbledore’s coming back!” several people yelled joyfully.

“You’ve caught the Heir of Slytherin!” squealed a girl at the Ravenclaw table.

“Quidditch matches are back on!” roared Wood excitedly.

When the hubbub had subsided, Professor McGonagall said, “Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit.”

There was an explosion of cheering. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and wasn't at all surprised to see that Draco Malfoy hadn't joined in. Ron, however, was looking happier than he'd looked in days.

“It won't matter that we never asked Myrtle, then!” he said to Harry. “Hermione'll probably have all the answers when they wake her up! Mind you, she'll go crazy when she finds out we've got exams in three days' time. She hasn't studied. It might be kinder to leave her where she is till they're over.”

Just then, Ginny Weasley came over and sat down next to Ron. She looked tense and nervous, and Harry noticed that her hands were twisting in her lap.

“What's up?” said Ron, helping himself to more porridge.

Ginny didn't say anything, but glanced up and down the Gryffindor table with a scared look on her face that reminded Harry of someone, though he couldn't think who.

“Spit it out,” said Ron, watching her.

Harry suddenly realized who Ginny looked like. She was rocking backward and forward slightly in her chair, exactly like Dobby did when he was teetering on the edge of revealing forbidden

information.

“I’ve got to tell you something,” Ginny mumbled, carefully not looking at Harry.

“What is it?” said Harry.

Ginny looked as though she couldn’t find the right words.

“*What?*” said Ron.

Ginny opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Harry leaned forward and spoke quietly, so that only Ginny and Ron could hear him.

“Is it something about the Chamber of Secrets? Have you seen something? Someone acting oddly?”

Ginny drew a deep breath and, at that precise moment, Percy Weasley appeared, looking tired and wan.

“If you’ve finished eating, I’ll take that seat, Ginny. I’m starving, I’ve only just come off patrol duty.”

Ginny jumped up as though her chair had just been electrified, gave Percy a fleeting, frightened look, and scampered away. Percy sat down and grabbed a mug from the center of the table.

“Percy!” said Ron angrily. “She was just about to tell us something important!”

Halfway through a gulp of tea, Percy choked.

“What sort of thing?” he said, coughing.

“I just asked her if she’d seen anything odd, and she started to say —”

“Oh — that — that’s nothing to do with the Chamber of Secrets,” said Percy at once.

“How do you know?” said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

“Well, er, if you must know, Ginny, er, walked in on me the other day when I was — well, never mind — the point is, she spotted me doing something and I, um, I asked her not to mention it to anybody. I must say, I did think she’d keep her word. It’s nothing, really, I’d just rather —”

Harry had never seen Percy look so uncomfortable.

“What were you doing, Percy?” said Ron, grinning. “Go on, tell us, we won’t laugh.”

Percy didn’t smile back.

“Pass me those rolls, Harry, I’m starving.”

Harry knew the whole mystery might be solved tomorrow without their help, but he wasn’t about to pass up a chance to speak to Myrtle if it turned up — and to his delight it did, midmorning, when they were being led to History of Magic by Gilderoy Lockhart.

Lockhart, who had so often assured them that all danger had passed, only to be proved wrong right away, was now wholeheartedly convinced that it was hardly worth the trouble to see them safely down the corridors. His hair wasn’t as sleek as usual; it seemed he had been up most of the night, patrolling the fourth floor.

“Mark my words,” he said, ushering them around a corner. “The first words out of those poor Petrified people’s mouths will be ‘*It was Hagrid.*’ Frankly, I’m astounded Professor McGonagall thinks all these security measures are necessary.”

“I agree, sir,” said Harry, making Ron drop his books in surprise.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Lockhart graciously while they waited

for a long line of Hufflepuffs to pass. “I mean, we teachers have quite enough to be getting on with, without walking students to classes and standing guard all night. . . .”

“That’s right,” said Ron, catching on. “Why don’t you leave us here, sir, we’ve only got one more corridor to go —”

“You know, Weasley, I think I will,” said Lockhart. “I really should go and prepare my next class —”

And he hurried off.

“Prepare his class,” Ron sneered after him. “Gone to curl his hair, more like.”

They let the rest of the Gryffindors draw ahead of them, then darted down a side passage and hurried off toward Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. But just as they were congratulating each other on their brilliant scheme —

“Potter! Weasley! What are you doing?”

It was Professor McGonagall, and her mouth was the thinnest of thin lines.

“We were — we were —” Ron stammered. “We were going to — to go and see —”

“Hermione,” said Harry. Ron and Professor McGonagall both looked at him.

“We haven’t seen her for ages, Professor,” Harry went on hurriedly, treading on Ron’s foot, “and we thought we’d sneak into the hospital wing, you know, and tell her the Mandrakes are nearly ready and, er, not to worry —”

Professor McGonagall was still staring at him, and for a moment, Harry thought she was going to explode, but when she spoke, it was

in a strangely croaky voice.

“Of course,” she said, and Harry, amazed, saw a tear glistening in her beady eye. “Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been . . . I quite understand. Yes, Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform Professor Binns where you’ve gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission.”

Harry and Ron walked away, hardly daring to believe that they’d avoided detention. As they turned the corner, they distinctly heard Professor McGonagall blow her nose.

“That,” said Ron fervently, “was the best story you’ve ever come up with.”

They had no choice now but to go to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey that they had Professor McGonagall’s permission to visit Hermione.

Madam Pomfrey let them in, but reluctantly.

“There’s just no *point* talking to a Petrified person,” she said, and they had to admit she had a point when they’d taken their seats next to Hermione. It was plain that Hermione didn’t have the faintest inkling that she had visitors, and that they might just as well tell her bedside cabinet not to worry for all the good it would do.

“Wonder if she did see the attacker, though?” said Ron, looking sadly at Hermione’s rigid face. “Because if he sneaked up on them all, no one’ll ever know. . . .”

But Harry wasn’t looking at Hermione’s face. He was more interested in her right hand. It lay clenched on top of her blankets, and bending closer, he saw that a piece of paper was scrunched inside

her fist.

Making sure that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere near, he pointed this out to Ron.

“Try and get it out,” Ron whispered, shifting his chair so that he blocked Harry from Madam Pomfrey’s view.

It was no easy task. Hermione’s hand was clamped so tightly around the paper that Harry was sure he was going to tear it. While Ron kept watch he tugged and twisted, and at last, after several tense minutes, the paper came free.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Harry smoothed it out eagerly and Ron leaned close to read it, too.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken’s egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

And beneath this, a single word had been written, in a hand Harry recognized as Hermione’s. *Pipes.*

It was as though somebody had just flicked a light on in his brain.

“Ron,” he breathed. “This is it. This is the answer. The monster in

the Chamber's a *basilisk* — a giant serpent! *That's* why I've been hearing that voice all over the place, and nobody else has heard it. It's because I understand Parseltongue. . . .”

Harry looked up at the beds around him.

“The basilisk kills people by looking at them. But no one's died — because no one looked it straight in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera. The basilisk burned up all the film inside it, but Colin just got Petrified. Justin . . . Justin must've seen the basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick! Nick got the full blast of it, but he couldn't die *again* . . . and Hermione and that Ravenclaw prefect were found with a mirror next to them. Hermione had just realized the monster was a basilisk. I bet you anything she warned the first person she met to look around corners with a mirror first! And that girl pulled out her mirror — and —”

Ron's jaw had dropped.

“And Mrs. Norris?” he whispered eagerly.

Harry thought hard, picturing the scene on the night of Halloween.

“The water . . .” he said slowly. “The flood from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. I bet you Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection. . . .”

He scanned the page in his hand eagerly. The more he looked at it, the more it made sense.

“‘*The Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it!*’” he read aloud. “Hagrid's roosters were killed! The Heir of Slytherin didn't want one anywhere near the castle once the Chamber was opened! ‘*Spiders flee before the Basilisk!*’ It all fits!”

“But how's the basilisk been getting around the place?” said Ron.

“A giant snake . . . Someone would’ve seen . . .”

Harry, however, pointed at the word Hermione had scribbled at the foot of the page.

“Pipes,” he said. “Pipes . . . Ron, it’s been using the plumbing. I’ve been hearing that voice inside the walls. . . .”

Ron suddenly grabbed Harry’s arm.

“The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!” he said hoarsely. “What if it’s a bathroom? What if it’s in —”

“— *Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom*,” said Harry.

They sat there, excitement coursing through them, hardly able to believe it.

“This means,” said Harry, “I can’t be the only Parselmouth in the school. The Heir of Slytherin’s one, too. That’s how he’s been controlling the basilisk.”

“What’re we going to do?” said Ron, whose eyes were flashing. “Should we go straight to McGonagall?”

“Let’s go to the staffroom,” said Harry, jumping up. “She’ll be there in ten minutes. It’s nearly break.”

They ran downstairs. Not wanting to be discovered hanging around in another corridor, they went straight into the deserted staffroom. It was a large, paneled room full of dark, wooden chairs. Harry and Ron paced around it, too excited to sit down.

But the bell to signal break never came.

Instead, echoing through the corridors came Professor McGonagall’s voice, magically magnified.

“All students to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staffroom. Immediately, please.”

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron.

“Not another attack? Not now?”

“What’ll we do?” said Ron, aghast. “Go back to the dormitory?”

“No,” said Harry, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers’ cloaks. “In here. Let’s hear what it’s all about. Then we can tell them what we’ve found out.”

They hid themselves inside it, listening to the rumbling of hundreds of people moving overhead, and the staffroom door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puzzled, others downright scared. Then Professor McGonagall arrived.

“It has happened,” she told the silent staffroom. “A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself.”

Professor Flitwick let out a squeal. Professor Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Snape gripped the back of a chair very hard and said, “How can you be sure?”

“The Heir of Slytherin,” said Professor McGonagall, who was very white, “left another message. Right underneath the first one. *‘Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.’*”

Professor Flitwick burst into tears.

“Who is it?” said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. “Which student?”

“Ginny Weasley,” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry felt Ron slide silently down onto the wardrobe floor beside him.

“We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow,” said Professor McGonagall. “This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore

always said . . .”

The staffroom door banged open again. For one wild moment, Harry was sure it would be Dumbledore. But it was Lockhart, and he was beaming.

“So sorry — dozed off — what have I missed?”

He didn’t seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Snape stepped forward.

“Just the man,” he said. “The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last.”

Lockhart blanched.

“That’s right, Gilderoy,” chipped in Professor Sprout. “Weren’t you saying just last night that you’ve known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?”

“I — well, I —” sputtered Lockhart.

“Yes, didn’t you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?” piped up Professor Flitwick.

“D-did I? I don’t recall —”

“I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn’t had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested,” said Snape. “Didn’t you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?”

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

“I — I really never — you may have misunderstood —”

“We’ll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy,” said Professor McGonagall. “Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We’ll make sure everyone’s out of your way. You’ll be able to tackle the monster

all by yourself. A free rein at last.”

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to the rescue. He didn't look remotely handsome anymore. His lip was trembling, and in the absence of his usually toothy grin, he looked weak-chinned and feeble.

“V-very well,” he said. “I'll — I'll be in my office, getting — getting ready.”

And he left the room.

“Right,” said Professor McGonagall, whose nostrils were flared, “that's got *him* out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories.”

The teachers rose and left, one by one.

It was probably the worst day of Harry's entire life. He, Ron, Fred, and George sat together in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, unable to say anything to each other. Percy wasn't there. He had gone to send an owl to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then shut himself up in his dormitory.

No afternoon ever lasted as long as that one, nor had Gryffindor Tower ever been so crowded, yet so quiet. Near sunset, Fred and George went up to bed, unable to sit there any longer.

“She knew something, Harry,” said Ron, speaking for the first time since they had entered the wardrobe in the staffroom. “That's why she was taken. It wasn't some stupid thing about Percy at all. She'd

found out something about the Chamber of Secrets. That must be why she was —” Ron rubbed his eyes frantically. “I mean, she was a pureblood. There can’t be any other reason.”

Harry could see the sun sinking, blood-red, below the skyline. This was the worst he had ever felt. If only there was something they could do. Anything.

“Harry,” said Ron. “D’you think there’s any chance at all she’s not — you know —”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t see how Ginny could still be alive.

“D’you know what?” said Ron. “I think we should go and see Lockhart. Tell him what we know. He’s going to try and get into the Chamber. We can tell him where we think it is, and tell him it’s a basilisk in there.”

Because Harry couldn’t think of anything else to do, and because he wanted to be doing something, he agreed. The Gryffindors around them were so miserable, and felt so sorry for the Weasleys, that nobody tried to stop them as they got up, crossed the room, and left through the portrait hole.

Darkness was falling as they walked down to Lockhart’s office. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on inside it. They could hear scraping, thumps, and hurried footsteps.

Harry knocked and there was a sudden silence from inside. Then the door opened the tiniest crack and they saw one of Lockhart’s eyes peering through it.

“Oh — Mr. Potter — Mr. Weasley —” he said, opening the door a bit wider. “I’m rather busy at the moment — if you would be quick

—”

“Professor, we’ve got some information for you,” said Harry. “We think it’ll help you.”

“Er — well — it’s not terribly —” The side of Lockhart’s face that they could see looked very uncomfortable. “I mean — well — all right —”

He opened the door and they entered.

His office had been almost completely stripped. Two large trunks stood open on the floor. Robes, jade-green, lilac, midnight-blue, had been hastily folded into one of them; books were jumbled untidily into the other. The photographs that had covered the walls were now crammed into boxes on the desk.

“Are you going somewhere?” said Harry.

“Er, well, yes,” said Lockhart, ripping a life-size poster of himself from the back of the door as he spoke and starting to roll it up. “Urgent call — unavoidable — got to go —”

“What about my sister?” said Ron jerkily.

“Well, as to that — most unfortunate —” said Lockhart, avoiding their eyes as he wrenched open a drawer and started emptying the contents into a bag. “No one regrets more than I —”

“You’re the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!” said Harry. “You can’t go now! Not with all the Dark stuff going on here!”

“Well — I must say — when I took the job —” Lockhart muttered, now piling socks on top of his robes. “nothing in the job description — didn’t expect —”

“You mean you’re *running away*?” said Harry disbelievingly. “After all that stuff you did in your books —”

“Books can be misleading,” said Lockhart delicately.

“You wrote them!” Harry shouted.

“My dear boy,” said Lockhart, straightening up and frowning at Harry. “Do use your common sense. My books wouldn’t have sold half as well if people didn’t think *I’d* done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He’d look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a hairy chin. I mean, come on —”

“So you’ve just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?” said Harry incredulously.

“Harry, Harry,” said Lockhart, shaking his head impatiently, “it’s not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had to track these people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn’t remember doing it. If there’s one thing I pride myself on, it’s my Memory Charms. No, it’s been a lot of work, Harry. It’s not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog.”

He banged the lids of his trunks shut and locked them.

“Let’s see,” he said. “I think that’s everything. Yes. Only one thing left.”

He pulled out his wand and turned to them.

“Awfully sorry, boys, but I’ll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can’t have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I’d never sell another book —”

Harry reached his wand just in time. Lockhart had barely raised

his, when Harry bellowed, “*Expelliarmus!*”

Lockhart was blasted backward, falling over his trunk; his wand flew high into the air; Ron caught it, and flung it out of the open window.

“Shouldn’t have let Professor Snape teach us that one,” said Harry furiously, kicking Lockhart’s trunk aside. Lockhart was looking up at him, feeble once more. Harry was still pointing his wand at him.

“What d’you want me to do?” said Lockhart weakly. “I don’t know where the Chamber of Secrets is. There’s nothing I can do.”

“You’re in luck,” said Harry, forcing Lockhart to his feet at wandpoint. “We think *we* know where it is. *And* what’s inside it. Let’s go.”

They marched Lockhart out of his office and down the nearest stairs, along the dark corridor where the messages shone on the wall, to the door of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.

They sent Lockhart in first. Harry was pleased to see that he was shaking.

Moaning Myrtle was sitting on the tank of the end toilet.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said when she saw Harry. “What do you want this time?”

“To ask you how you died,” said Harry.

Myrtle’s whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a flattering question.

“Ooooh, it was dreadful,” she said with relish. “It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I’d hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in.

They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a *boy* speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then —” Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. “I *died*.”

“How?” said Harry.

“No idea,” said Myrtle in hushed tones. “I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away. . . .” She looked dreamily at Harry. “And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she’d ever laughed at my glasses.”

“Where exactly did you see the eyes?” said Harry.

“Somewhere there,” said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

Harry and Ron hurried over to it. Lockhart was standing well back, a look of utter terror on his face.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Harry saw it: Scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

“That tap’s never worked,” said Myrtle brightly as he tried to turn it.

“Harry,” said Ron. “Say something. Something in Parseltongue.”

“But —” Harry thought hard. The only times he’d ever managed to speak Parseltongue were when he’d been faced with a real snake. He stared hard at the tiny engraving, trying to imagine it was real.

“Open up,” he said.

He looked at Ron, who shook his head.

“English,” he said.

Harry looked back at the snake, willing himself to believe it was alive. If he moved his head, the candlelight made it look as though it were moving.

“Open up,” he said.

Except that the words weren't what he heard; a strange hissing had escaped him, and at once the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move; the sink, in fact, sank, right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

Harry heard Ron gasp and looked up again. He had made up his mind what he was going to do.

“I'm going down there,” he said.

He couldn't not go, not now they had found the entrance to the Chamber, not if there was even the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive.

“Me too,” said Ron.

There was a pause.

“Well, you hardly seem to need me,” said Lockhart, with a shadow of his old smile. “I'll just —”

He put his hand on the door knob, but Ron and Harry both pointed their wands at him.

“You can go first,” Ron snarled.

White-faced and wandless, Lockhart approached the opening.

“Boys,” he said, his voice feeble. “Boys, what good will it do?”

Harry jabbed him in the back with his wand. Lockhart slid his legs into the pipe.

“I really don’t think —” he started to say, but Ron gave him a push, and he slid out of sight. Harry followed quickly. He lowered himself slowly into the pipe, then let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. He could see more pipes branching off in all directions, but none as large as theirs, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downward, and he knew that he was falling deeper below the school than even the dungeons. Behind him he could hear Ron, thudding slightly at the curves.

And then, just as he had begun to worry about what would happen when he hit the ground, the pipe leveled out, and he shot out of the end with a wet thud, landing on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel large enough to stand in. Lockhart was getting to his feet a little ways away, covered in slime and white as a ghost. Harry stood aside as Ron came whizzing out of the pipe, too.

“We must be miles under the school,” said Harry, his voice echoing in the black tunnel.

“Under the lake, probably,” said Ron, squinting around at the dark, slimy walls.

All three of them turned to stare into the darkness ahead.

“*Lumos!*” Harry muttered to his wand and it lit again. “C’mon,” he said to Ron and Lockhart, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor.

The tunnel was so dark that they could only see a little distance ahead. Their shadows on the wet walls looked monstrous in the wandlight.

“Remember,” Harry said quietly as they walked cautiously

forward, “any sign of movement, close your eyes right away. . . .”

But the tunnel was quiet as the grave, and the first unexpected sound they heard was a loud *crunch* as Ron stepped on what turned out to be a rat’s skull. Harry lowered his wand to look at the floor and saw that it was littered with small animal bones. Trying very hard not to imagine what Ginny might look like if they found her, Harry led the way forward, around a dark bend in the tunnel.

“Harry — there’s something up there —” said Ron hoarsely, grabbing Harry’s shoulder.

They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of something huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn’t moving.

“Maybe it’s asleep,” he breathed, glancing back at the other two. Lockhart’s hands were pressed over his eyes. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt.

Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward, his wand held high.

The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

“Blimey,” said Ron weakly.

There was a sudden movement behind them. Gilderoy Lockhart’s knees had given way.

“Get up,” said Ron sharply, pointing his wand at Lockhart.

Lockhart got to his feet — then he dived at Ron, knocking him to the ground.

Harry jumped forward, but too late — Lockhart was straightening up, panting, Ron’s wand in his hand and a gleaming smile back on his

face.

“The adventure ends here, boys!” he said. “I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two *tragically* lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body — say good-bye to your memories!”

He raised Ron’s Spellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, “*Obliviate!*”

The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thundering to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock.

“Ron!” he shouted. “Are you okay? Ron!”

“I’m here!” came Ron’s muffled voice from behind the rockfall. “I’m okay — this git’s not, though — he got blasted by the wand —”

There was a dull thud and a loud “ow!” It sounded as though Ron had just kicked Lockhart in the shins.

“What now?” Ron’s voice said, sounding desperate. “We can’t get through — it’ll take ages. . . .”

Harry looked up at the tunnel ceiling. Huge cracks had appeared in it. He had never tried to break apart anything as large as these rocks by magic, and now didn’t seem a good moment to try — what if the whole tunnel caved in?

There was another thud and another “ow!” from behind the rocks. They were wasting time. Ginny had already been in the Chamber of Secrets for hours. . . . Harry knew there was only one thing to do.

“Wait there,” he called to Ron. “Wait with Lockhart. I’ll go on. . . .”

If I'm not back in an hour . . .”

There was a very pregnant pause.

“I'll try and shift some of this rock,” said Ron, who seemed to be trying to keep his voice steady. “So you can — can get back through. And, Harry —”

“See you in a bit,” said Harry, trying to inject some confidence into his shaking voice.

And he set off alone past the giant snake skin.

Soon the distant noise of Ron straining to shift the rocks was gone. The tunnel turned and turned again. Every nerve in Harry's body was tingling unpleasantly. He wanted the tunnel to end, yet dreaded what he'd find when it did. And then, at last, as he crept around yet another bend, he saw a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds.

Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their eyes looked strangely alive.

He could guess what he had to do. He cleared his throat, and the emerald eyes seemed to flicker.

“*Open,*” said Harry, in a low, faint hiss.

The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Harry, shaking from head to foot, walked inside.

Die Kamer van Geheimenisse

“Al daardie kere dat ons in die badkamer was en sy net drie hokkies van ons af was,” sê Ron bitter toe hulle die volgende oggend ontbyt eet. “Toe kon ons haar maklik gevra het, maar nou . . .”

Dit was al swaar genoeg om spinnekoppe te gaan soek. Om lank genoeg van die onderwysers af weg te kom om by die meisies se kleedkamer in te glip, en dit nogal reg langs die plek waar die eerste aanval plaasgevind het, is ’n saak van onmoontlikheid.

Tydens hul eerste klas, Transfigurasie, gebeur iets wat hulle, vir die eerste keer in weke, van die Kamer van Geheimenisse laat vergeet. Die klas is skaars tien minute aan die gang, of professor McGonagall sê dat hul eksamens op die eerste Junie gaan begin, net een week van vandag af.

“Eksamens?” kla Septimus Floris. “Moet ons eksamen skryf?”

Van agter Harry weerklink ’n harde slag toe Neville Loggerenberg se towerstaf glip en een van die pote van sy lessenaar verdwyn. Professor McGonagall waai haar towerstaf, maak dit vinnig reg en draai dan fronsend na Septimus.

“Die rede hoekom die skool nog oop is in hierdie moeilike tye is om vir julle ’n behoorlike opvoeding te gee,” sê sy streng. “Die eksamen sal dus soos gewoonlik geskryf word en ek vertrou dat julle al hard aan die hersien is.”

Hard hersien! Dit het nooit eens by Harry opgekom dat daar eksamens sal wees met die kasteel in so ’n toestand nie. ’n Rebelse gebrom klink op uit die klaskamer en dit laat professor McGonagall nog kwaaier frons.

“Dit is professor Dompeldorius se opdrag dat die skool so normaal moonlik moet voortgaan,” sê sy. “Ek hoef seker nie te sê dat dit ook beteken dat ons wil uitvind wat julle alles hierdie jaar geleer het nie.”

Harry loer na die paar wit konyne wat hy veronderstel is om in pantoffels te verander. Wat het hy al hierdie jaar geleer? Hy kan aan niks dink wat hy in die eksamen sal kan gebruik nie.

Ron lyk asof hy so pas gehoor het dat hy in die Verbode Woud moet gaan woon.

“Hoe gaan ek eksamen skryf met hierdie ding?” vra hy vir Harry terwyl hy sy towerstaf, wat so pas hard begin fluit het, in die lug hou.

Drie dae voor hul eerste eksamen maak professor McGonagall ’n aankondiging tydens ontbyt.

“Ek het goeie nuus,” sê sy en pleks dat die Groot Saal stil word, is daar ’n uitbarsting.

“Dompeldorius kom terug!” roep ’n klomp mense opgewonde uit.

“Die Erfgenaam van Slibberin is gevang!” gil ’n meisie vanaf die Raweklou-tafel.

“Ons mag weer Kwiddiek speel!” brul Wood opgewonde.

Toe die kabaal bedaar, sê professor McGonagall, “Professor Spruit het vir my gesê dat die alruine uiteindelik gereed is om geoes te word. Vanag sal ons die mense wat Versteen is, weer kan verlewendig. Dit is moontlik dat een van hulle vir ons sal kan sê wie of wat hulle aangeval het. Ek hoop ons sal hierdie vreeslike jaar kan afsluit deur die skuldige te vang.”

Luide toejuiging volg. Harry kyk na die Slibberin-tafel en is glad nie verbaas om te sien dat Draco Malfoy nie saamjuig nie. Ron lyk gelukkiger as wat hy vir dae gelyk het.

“Dan maak dit nie meer saak dat ons nie vir Katryn gevra het nie!” sê Harry. “Hermien sal beslis al die antwoorde hê wanneer sy wakker word! Maar sal sy woedend wees as sy agterkom dat ons oor drie dae eksamen skryf. Sy het nog niks hersien nie. Dis dalk beter om haar te los waar sy is tot die eksamen verby is.”

Net toe kom Ginny Weasley aangestap en gaan sit langs Ron. Sy lyk gespanne en senuagtig, en Harry sien dat haar hande ineengeklem op haar skoot is.

“Wat gaan aan?” vra Ron terwyl hy nog pap inskep.

Ginny antwoord nie. Sy kyk op en af na die Griffindor-tafel met ’n verskrikte uitdrukking op haar gesig wat vir Harry aan iemand laat dink, hy weet net nie wie nie.

“Spoeg dit uit,” sê Ron, wat haar dophou.

Harry besef skielik na wie Ginny lyk. Sy wieg agtertoe en vorentoe in haar stoel net soos Dobbi wanneer hy op die punt is om iets te sê wat hy nie mag oorvertel nie.

“Daar is iets wat ek vir julle moet vertel,” mompel Ginny, versigtig om nie na Harry te kyk nie.

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry.

Dit lyk of Ginny nie die regte woorde kan kry nie.

“Wat?” sê Ron.

Ginny maak haar mond oop, maar geen geluid kom uit nie. Harry leun vooroor en praat so saggies dat net Ginny en Ron hom kan hoor.

“Is dit iets oor die Kamer van Geheimenisse? Het jy iets gesien? Iemand wat vreemd optree?”

Ginny haal diep asem en op daardie oomblik verskyn Percy Weasley. Hy lyk asvaal en moeg.

“As jy klaar geëet het, sal ek daar sit, Ginny. Ek is verskriklik honger. Ek kom nou net van patrollie af.”

Ginny spring op asof ’n elektriese skok deur haar gegaan het, gooi ’n vlietende en verskrikte blik na Percy en maak haar uit die voete. Percy gaan sit en gryp ’n beker van die middel van die tafel.

“Percy!” sê Ron vererg. “Sy was op die punt om iets belangriks vir ons te sê!”

Percy stik aan ’n groot sluk tee.

“Watse iets?” vra hy hoesend.

“Harry het vir haar gevra of sy iets vreemds gesien het, sy’t net begin om te sê –”

“O – dit – dit het niks met die Kamer van Geheimenisse uit te waai nie,” sê Percy dadelik.

“Hoe weet jy?” sê Ron en lig sy wenkbroue.

“Wel, h’m, as jy nou moet weet, Ginny, h’m, het die ander dag gesien toe ek – wel, ag wat maak dit tog saak – die punt is sy’t my iets sien doen en ek, h’m, het vir haar gevra om vir niemand te vertel nie. Ek moet sê, ek het nogal gedink sy sal haar woord hou. Dis natuurlik niks nie, regtig, dis net dat ek eerder –”

Harry het Percy nog nooit so ongemaklik sien lyk nie.

“Wat het jy gedoen, Percy?” sê Ron met ’n grinnik. “Toe, man, sê, ons sal nie lag nie.”

Percy glimlag nie terug nie.

“Gee die broodrolletjies aan, Harry, ek gaan dood van die honger.”

Harry weet dat die geheim waarskynlik teen die volgende dag opgelos sal wees en dit sonder hul bydrae, maar hy sal ’n kans om met Katryn te praat, ook nie laat verbygaan nie. Tot sy grootste vreugde kry hy so ’n kans, daardie selfde oggend toe Gilderoy Lockhart hulle na die Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns neem.

Lockhart, wat so dikwels al vir almal verseker het dat die gevaar verby is, net om kort daarna verkeerd bewys te word, is nou heeltemal oortuig dat dit werklik nie die moeite werd is om saam met die studente deur die gange te stap nie. Sy hare is nie meer so versorg soos gewoonlik nie; dit blyk dat hy die grootste deel van die nag op was om die gang op die vierde verdieping te patrolleer.

“Luister julle nou maar vir my,” sê hy terwyl hy hulle om ’n hoek lei, “die eerste woorde wat uit daardie arme Versteende mense se monde gaan kom, gaan wees, ‘dit was Hagrid’. Ek is regtig verbaas dat professor

McGonagall dink dat al hierdie veiligheidsmaatreëls nog nodig is.”

“Ek stem saam, professor,” sê Harry, sodat Ron sy boeke uit pure verbasing laat val.

“Dankie, Harry,” sê Lockhart vriendelik, terwyl hulle wag dat ’n lang ry Hoesenproesers verbystap. “Ek bedoel, ons as onderwysers het meer as genoeg om te doen. Ons het regtig nie tyd om studente na hul klasse te neem en die hele nag lank wag te staan nie . . .”

“Dis waar,” sê Ron, wat begin besef het waarop Harry afstuur. “Hoekom los u ons nie hier nie, professor, daar’s nog net een gang oor.”

“Jy weet, Weasley, ek dink ek sal,” sê Lockhart. “Ek moet regtig nog gaan voorberei vir die volgende klas.”

Hy stap haastig weg.

“Voorberei,” sê Ron smalend. “Sy hare indraai, sou ek sê.”

Hulle laat die res van die Griffindors vooruitgaan, toe glip hulle langs ’n sygang en laat vat na Katryn Kermkous se badkamer. Net toe hulle mekaar geluk wens met hul briljante beplanning, toe . . .

“Potter! Weasley! Wat doen julle?”

Dit is professor McGonagall en haar mond is die dunste van strepies.

“Ons – ons het net –” stamel Ron, “ons was op pad – om te gaan –”

“Hermien,” sê Harry. Sowel Ron as professor McGonagall staar na hom.

“Ons het haar eeue laas gesien, professor,” gaan Harry vinnig voort en trap ongemerk op Ron se voet, “en ons het gedink ons kan dalk by die siekeboeg inglip en vir haar sê dat die alruine amper reg is en dat sy haar nie moet bekommer nie.”

Professor McGonagall staar hom nog steeds aan en vir ’n oomblik dink Harry dat sy gaan ontplof, maar toe sy praat, is daar ’n vreemde krakie in haar stem.

“Natuurlik,” sê sy en Harry sien tot sy verbasing dat daar trane in haar kraalogies blink. “Natuurlik, ek besef dat dit die swaarste moet wees vir die vriende van . . . ek verstaan heeltemal. Ja, Potter, natuurlik kan julle vir Hermien gaan besoek. Ek sal professor Binns sê waarheen julle is. Sê vir Madame Pomfrey ek het julle toestemming gegee.”

Harry en Ron loop vinnig weg. Hulle kan skaars glo dat hulle nie deensie gekry het nie. Toe hulle om die hoek stap, hoor hulle duidelik hoe professor McGonagall haar neus snuit.

“Dit,” sê Ron met oortuiging, “is die beste storie waarmee jy nog vorendag gekom het.”

Hulle het nou geen ander keuse as om na die siekeboeg te gaan en vir Madame Pomfrey te vertel dat hulle professor McGonagall se toestemming het om Hermien te besoek nie.

Madame Pomfrey is glad nie lus om hulle te laat inkom nie.

“Dit help nie om met ’n Versteende persoon te praat nie,” sê sy en hulle

moet erken dat sy reg is toe hulle eers langs Hermien sit. Dit is duidelik dat Hermien nie die vaagste benul het dat sy besoekers het nie en dat hulle net sowel vir die bedkassie kan vertel om nie bekommerd te wees nie, so min help dit.

“Ek wonder of sy die aanvaller gesien het?” sê Ron terwyl hy hartseer na Hermien se strak gesig kyk. “As hy hulle van agter bekruip het, sal niemand ooit weet . . .”

Maar Harry kyk nie na Hermien se gesig nie. Hy is meer geïnteresseerd in haar regterhand. Dit lê bo-op die komberse en toe hy nader leun, sien hy dat daar ’n stukkie papier in haar vuus opgefrommel is.

Hy maak eers seker dat Madame Pomfrey nie naby is nie, toe wys hy dit vir Ron.

“Probeer dit uitkry,” fluister Ron en skuif sy stoel so dat Madame Pomfrey nie vir Harry kan sien nie.

Dis geen geringe taak nie. Hermien se hand is so styf om die paper geklem dat Harry seker is dat hy dit gaan skeur. Terwyl Ron wag hou, rem en trek hy, en uiteindelik, na ’n paar benoude oomblikke, kom die papier los.

Dit is ’n bladsy uit ’n baie ou biblioteekboek. Harry stryk dit gretig glad en Ron leun nader om ook te lees.

Van die talle gevreesde ondiere en monsters wat die wêreld deurkruis, is daar geeneen wat vreemder en dodeliker as die Basilisk is nie, ook bekend as die Koning van Slange. Hierdie reptiel, wat reusagtig groot kan word en vir honderde jare kan leef, kom uit ’n hoendereier wat onder ’n skurwepadda uitgeborei is. Die prooi word op ’n besonder interessante manier gedood, want behalwe die dodelike, giftige tande, het die Basilisk ’n moordende blik, en almal wat in sy oë kyk, sterf oombliklik. Spinnekoppe is veral lugtig vir die Basilisk, wat hul mees gevreesde vyand is, en die Basilisk vlug net vir die gekraai van die haan, wat vir hom dodelik is.

Hieronder staan ’n enkele woord, in ’n handskrif wat Harry dadelik herken as Hermien s’n. *Pype.*

Dis of iemand ’n lig in sy brein aanskakel.

“Ron,” hyg hy, “dit is die antwoord. Die monster in die Kamer is ’n Basilisk – ’n reuseslang! Dis hoekom ek daardie stem hoor terwyl niemand anders dit kan hoor nie. Dis omdat ek Parseltaal verstaan . . .”

Harry kyk na die beddens om hom.

“Die Basilisk maak mense dood deur na hulle te kyk. Maar niemand is dood nie – want niemand het nog vol in sy oë gekyk nie. Colin het deur sy kamera gekyk. Die Basilisk het die film binne-in laat uitbrand, maar Colin is net Versteen. Justin . . . Justin moet die Basilisk deur Nick-amper-sonder-kop gesien het! Nick het hom in die oë gekyk, maar Nick kon nie weer doodgaan nie . . . en Hermien en daardie Raweklou-prefek het ’n spieël

langs hulle gehad. Hermien het net besef die monster is 'n Basilisk. Ek wed sy't die eerste mens wat sy raakgeloop het, gewaarsku om met 'n spieël om die hoek te kyk! Toe haal daardie meisie 'n spieëltjie uit en – en –"

Ron se onderkaak val oop.

"En mev. Norris?" fluister hy gretig.

Harry dink hard en probeer die toneel op Allerheiligeaand onthou.

"Die water . . ." sê hy stadig, "die vloed uit Katryn Kermkous se badkamer. Ek wed jou mev. Norris het net die weerkaatsing gesien . . ."

Weer bekyk hy die bladsy in sy hand. Hoe langer hy kyk, hoe meer sin maak dit.

"Die gekraai van die haan is dodelik vir hom!" lees hy hardop. "Hagrid se hane is doodgemaak! Die Erfgenaam van Slibberin wou nie 'n haan naby die kasteel hê toe die Kamer eers oop is nie! *Spinnekoppe is veral lugtig vir die Basilisk!* Dit pas alles!"

"Maar hoe het die Basilisk dit reggekry om rond te beweeg?" sê Ron. "n Yslike, vieslike slang . . . iemand moet iets gesien het . . ."

Maar Harry wys na die woord wat Hermien aan die onderkant van die bladsy geskryf het.

"Pype," sê hy. "Pype . . . Ron, dit gebruik die waterpype. Ek het die stem in die mure gehoor . . ."

Skielik gryp Ron Harry se arm.

"Die ingang na die Kamer van Geheimenisse!" sê hy skor. "Wat as dit 'n badkamer is? Wat as dit in –"

"– Katryn Kermkous se badkamer is," sê Harry.

Hulle sit net daar, die opwinding bruis deur hul are, hulle kan dit alles skaars glo.

"Dit beteken," sê Harry, "dat ek nie die enigste Parselmond in die skool is nie. Die Erfgenaam van Slibberin is ook een. Dis hoe hy die Basilisk beheer."

"Wat doen ons nou?" sê Ron en sy oë blits. "Sal ons dadelik vir McGonagall gaan sê?"

"Kom ons gaan na die personeelkamer," sê Harry en spring op. "Sy sal binne tien minute daar wees, dis amper pouse."

Hulle hardloop af met die trappe. Omdat hulle nie in die gange betrap wil word nie, gaan hulle reguit na die verlate personeelkamer. Dit is 'n groot vertrek met paneelwerk en donker houtstoele. Harry en Ron stap op en neer; hulle is te opgewonde om te sit.

Maar die pouseklok lui nie.

Pleks daarvan eggo professor McGonagall se stem, wat verbasend goed versterk is, deur die gange.

"Alle studente moet onmiddellik na hul Huisslaapsale gaan. Alle onderwysers na die personeelkamer. Dadelik, asseblief."

Harry swaai om en staar na Ron.

“Nie nog ’n aanval nie! Nie nou nie!”

“Wat moet ons doen?” sê Ron ontsteld. “Teruggaan na die slaapsaal?”

“Nee,” sê Harry en kyk om hom. Aan sy linkerkant staan ’n lelike kas waarin die onderwysers se mantels hang. “Hier. Gou. Kom ons hoor wat hulle sê. Dan kan ons hulle vertel wat ons uitgevind het.”

Hulle kruip binne-in weg en luister na die gerammel van honderde mense wat bo hul koppe beweeg en die personeelkamer se deur wat oopgestamp word. Van tussen die muwwe voue van die mantels kyk hulle hoe die onderwysers die vertrek binnekom. Party van hulle lyk verward, andere lyk bang. Dan daag professor McGonagall op.

“Dit het gebeur,” sê sy. “’n Student is deur die monster weggevoer. Reguit na die Kamer van Geheimenisse.”

Professor Flickerpitt gil. Professor Spruit klap haar hande oor haar mond. Snerp gryp die agterkant van ’n stoel styf vas en sê, “Hoe weet jy dit?”

“Die Erfgenaam van Slibberin,” sê professor McGonagall, wat nou baie bleek is, “het nog ’n boodskap gelaat. Reg onder die vorige een. *‘Haar geraamte sal vir ewig in die Kamer lê.’*”

Professor Flickerpitt bars uit in trane.

“Wie is dit?” sê Madame Hooch wie se knieë ingegee het sodat sy in ’n stoel neersy. “Watter student?”

“Ginny Weasley,” sê professor McGonagall.

Harry voel hoe Ron geluidloos langs hom na die bodem van die kas gly.

“Ons sal al die studente môre huis toe moet stuur,” sê professor McGonagall. “Dit is die einde van Hogwarts. Dompeldorius het nog altyd gesê . . .”

Weer gaan die personeelkamer se deur oop. Vir een wilde oomblik is Harry seker dat dit Dompeldorius is, maar dit is Lockhart en sy gesig straal.

“So jammer – het ’n uiltjie geknip – wat het ek gemis?”

Dis of hy nie merk dat die ander onderwysers met iets soos haat na hom kyk nie. Snerp kom vorentoe.

“Net die man,” sê hy. “Net die man. ’n Dogter is deur die monster weggevoer, Lockhart. Sy’s na die Kamer van Geheimenisse geneem. Jou oomblik van glorie is uiteindelik hier.”

Lockhart word bleek.

“Dis reg, Gilderoy,” beaam professor Spruit. “Het jy nie net laas nag gesê dat jy nog altyd geweet het waar die ingang na die Kamer van Geheimenisse is nie?”

“Ek – wel, ek –” stotter Lockhart.

“Ja, het jy nie vir my gesê dat jy seker is jy weet wat daarbinne is nie?” laat professor Flickerpitt van hom hoor.

“H-het ek? Ek kan dit glad nie onthou . . .”

“Ek onthou baie beslis dat jy gesê het jy is jammer jy het nie tyd gehad om die monster te vang voor Hagrid se arrestasie nie,” sê Snerp. “Het jy nie gesê die hele besigheid is verbrou, en dat jy van die begin af vrye teuels moes gehad het nie?”

Lockhart staar in die rondte na sy kollegas se stroewe gesigte.

“Ek . . . ek het regtig nie . . . Julle het my verkeerd verstaan . . .”

“Dan laat ons dit in jou hande, Gilderoy,” sê professor McGonagall. “Vannag sal ’n uitstekende tyd wees om dit te doen. Ons sal seker maak dat niemand in jou pad is nie. Jy sal die monster manalleen kan takel. Vrye teuels . . . uiteindelik.”

Lockhart tuur wanhopig om hom, maar niemand kom tot sy redding nie. Nou lyk hy nie meer in die minste aantreklik nie. Sy lip bewe en sonder sy gewone wit glimlag, lyk hy tingerig en sy ken swak.

“G-goed,” sê hy. “Ek – ek sal in my kantoor wees, besig om – om alles reg te kry.”

Met hierdie woorde stap hy uit die vertrek.

“Goed,” sê professor McGonagall wie se neusvleuels wydgeriek is, “nou is hy tog uit die pad. Die Hoofde van al die Huise moet hul studente gaan vertel wat aangaan. Sê vir hulle dat die Hogwarts Express hulle môre donsoordag huis toe sal neem. Die res van julle moet asseblief seker maak dat alle studente in hul slaapsale is.”

Die onderwysers staan op. Een vir een stap hulle uit.

Dit is waarskynlik die slegste dag van Harry se hele lewe. Hy, Ron, Fred en George sit saam in ’n hoek van die Griffindor-geselskamer, maar nie een van hulle kan ’n woord uitkry nie. Percy is nie daar nie. Hy het ’n uil vir mnr. en mev. Weasley gaan stuur en homself daarna in sy slaapsaal toegesluit.

Nog nooit was ’n middag so lank soos hierdie een nie, nog nooit was die Griffindor-toring so vol en tog so stil nie. Teen sonsondergang kan Fred en George nie langer daar sit nie en gaan hulle bed toe.

“Sy’t iets geweet, Harry,” sê Ron. Dis die eerste keer sedert hulle in die kas in die personeelkamer geklim het dat hy praat. “Dis hoekom sy weggeneem is. Dit was nie die een of ander simpel ding oor Percy nie. Sy’t iets uitgevind oor die Kamer van Geheimenisse. Dis hoekom sy –” Ron vryf sy oë. “Ek bedoel, sy’s ’n volbloed. Daar kan geen ander rede wees nie.”

Harry sien hoe ’n bloedrooi son agter die horison verdwyn. Hy het nog nooit so sleg gevoel nie. As daar net iets is wat hulle kan doen. Enigiets.

“Harry,” sê Ron, “dink jy daar’s ’n kans dat sy nie – jy weet –”

Harry weet nie wat om te sê nie. Hy kan nie sien hoe Ginny nog kan lewe nie.

“Weet jy wat,” sê Ron, “ek dink ons moet vir Lockhart gaan sien. Hom vertel wat ons weet. Hy gaan probeer om in die Kamer te kom. Ons kan hom sê waar ons dink dit is en dat ons dink dat dit ’n Basilisk is.”

Omdat Harry aan niks anders kan dink om te doen nie, en omdat hy graag iets wil doen, stem hy in. Die Griffindors om hulle is so mistroos-tig en voel so jammer vir die Weasleys dat niemand hulle eens probeer keer toe hulle opstaan, deur die vertrek stap en deur die portretopening klim nie.

Dis besig om donker te word toe hulle na Lockhart se kantoor stap. Dit klink of hy baie besig is daar binne. Hulle hoor ’n geskraap en dowwe slae en vinnige voetstappe.

Toe Harry klop, is dit skielik stil daar binne. Toe gaan die deur op die kleinste skrefie oop en hulle sien een van Lockhart se oë wat daardeur tuur.

“O . . . mnr. Potter . . . mnr. Weasley . . .” sê hy en maak die deur ’n klein bietjie wyer oop. “Ek is op die oomblik redelik besig. As julle gou sal maak . . .”

“Professor, ons het inligting vir u,” sê Harry. “Ons dink dit kan dalk help.”

“O – wel – dis nie juis vreeslik –” Die kant van Lockhart se gesig wat hulle kan sien, lyk baie ongemaklik. “Ek bedoel – wel – goed dan.”

Hy maak die deur oop en hulle gaan in.

Sy kantoor is feitlik heeltemal leeg. Twee groot trommels staan oop op die vloer. Klere en mantels, smaraggroen, lilapers, middernagblou, lê haastig opgevou binne-in een van hulle; in die ander een lê ’n slordige hoop boeke. Die foto’s teen die mure is in dose op die vloer gedruk.

“Gaan u iewers heen?” sê Harry.

“H’m, wel, ja,” sê Lockhart en terwyl hy praat, skeur hy ’n lewensgroot plakkaat van homself van die agterkant van die deur af en rol dit op. “Dringende sake . . . onvermydelik . . . moet dadelik gaan . . .”

“Wat van my suster?” stamel Ron.

“Wel, wat dit betref – uiteraars rampspoedig,” sê Lockhart en vermy hulle oë terwyl hy ’n laai ooptrek en die inhoud in ’n sak gooi. “Niemand is jammerder as ek –”

“U is die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser!” sê Harry. “U kan nie nou weggaan nie! Nie met al die Donker dinge wat hier aan-gaan nie!”

“Wel, ek moet sê . . . toe ek die werk aanvaar het . . .” mompel Lockhart, wat nou ’n klomp sokkies bo-op sy mantels pak, “was daar niks in die werksbeskrywing . . . het nie verwag . . .”

“Jy meen jy *hardloop* weg?” sê Harry ongelowig. “Na al daardie goed wat jy in jou boeke gedoen het?”

“Boeke kan misleidend wees,” sê Lockhart versigtig.

“Jy het hulle geskryf!” skree Harry.

“My liewe seun,” Lockhart kom orent en frons vir Harry, “gebruik tog jou gesonde verstand. My boeke sal nie naastenby so goed verkoop as mense nie dink dat ek al daardie dinge gedoen het nie. Niemand wil lees oor die een of ander lelike ou Armeniese towenaar nie, al het hy ook ’n dorp van weerwolwe gered. Hy sal aaklig op die voorblad lyk. Absoluut geen gevoel vir klere nie. En die heks wat met die Dresden Doodsbode klaargespeel het, het ’n haaslip. Ek meen, regtig . . .”

“So het jy die krediet geneem vir wat ’n klomp ander mense gedoen het?” sê Harry ongelowig.

“Harry, Harry,” Lockhart skud sy kop ongeduldig, “dis nie naastenby so eenvoudig nie. Daar was baie werk by betrokke. Ek moes al hierdie mense opspoor. Hulle uitvra presies hoe hulle dit gedoen het. Toe moes ek ’n Geheuetowerspreuk oor hulle uitspreek sodat hulle nie kan onthou wat hulle gedoen het nie. As daar een ding is waarop ek trots is, is dit my Geheuetowerspreuke. Nee, dit was baie werk, Harry. Dis nie net ’n geteken van boeke en ’n geneem van foto’s nie, weet jy. As jy beroemd wil wees, moet jy bereid wees om lank en hard daaraan te werk.”

Hy klap die trommels se deksels toe en sluit hulle.

“Laat ek sien,” sê hy. “Ek dink ek het alles. Ja. Nog net een ding om te doen.”

Hy haal sy towerstaf uit en draai na hulle.

“Ek is verskriklik jammer, seuns, maar ek sal ’n Geheuetowerspreuk oor julle moet uitspreek. Kan nie toelaat dat julle al my geheime uitblaker nie. Ek sal nooit weer ’n boek verkoop nie . . .”

Harry het sy towerstaf net betyds uitgehaal. Lockhart het syne nog skaars gelig, toe bulder Harry, “*Expelliarmus!*”

Lockhart word agtertoe geblaas sodat hy bo-oor sy trommel val. Sy towerstaf vlieg hoog die lug in; Ron gryp dit en gooi dit deur die oop venster.

“U moes nie dat professor Snerp ons daardie een geleer het nie,” sê Harry woedend en skop Lockhart se trommel uit die pad. Lockhart staar na hom, van voor af verskrik. Harry se towerstaf is nog steeds op hom gerig.

“Wat wil jy hê moet ek doen?” vra Lockhart floutjies. “Ek weet nie waar die Kamer van Geheimenisse is nie. Daar is niks wat ek kan doen nie.”

“Dis jou gelukkige dag,” sê Harry en dwing Lockhart op sy voete deur sy towerstaf dreigend voor hom te hou. “Ons dink *ons* weet waar dit is. En wat binne-in is. Kom ons gaan.”

Hulle laat vir Lockhart uit die kantoor stap en af met die naaste stel trappe, al met die donker gang af waar die boodskappe teen die muur blink, tot by die deur voor Katryn Kermkous se badkamer.

Hulle stuur Lockhart eerste in. Harry is bly om te sien dat hy bewe.

Katryn Kermkous sit op die kant van die verste toilet.

“O, dis julle,” sê sy toe sy vir Harry sien. “Wat wil julle nou weer hê?”

“Ons wil weet hoe jy doodgegaan het,” sê Harry.

Katryn se hele gesig verander. Sy lyk asof sy nog nooit so ’n vleiende vraag moes antwoord nie.

“Oeee, dit was aaklig,” sê sy met smaak. “Dit het net hier gebeur. Ek is in hierdie einste hokkie dood. Ek onthou dit so goed. Ek het weggekrui, want Olive Hornby het my oor my bril geterg. Die deur was gesluit en ek het gehuil, toe hoor ek iemand inkom. Hulle het iets snaaks gesê. ’n Ander taal, dink ek. In elk geval, dit was ’n *seun* se stem en dis wat my kwaad gemaak het. Toe sluit ek die deur oop om vir hom te sê hy moet hulle eie toilette gebruik, en toe —” Katryn pof haarself op en haar hele gesig skitter, “toe gaan ek dood.”

“Hoe?” sê Harry.

“Ek het nie ’n idee nie,” sê Katryn in ’n fluisterstem. “Ek onthou net twee groot, geel oë. My hele liggaam het soort van opgepak, en toe dryf ek weg . . .” Sy kyk dromerig na Harry. “En toe kom ek weer terug. Ek was vasberade om by Olive Hornby te spook, sien. O, sy was jammer dat sy ooit vir my bril gelag het.”

“Presies waar het jy die oë gesien?” sê Harry.

“Daar iewers,” sê Katryn en wys vaagweg in die rigting van die wasbak voor haar toilet.

Harry en Ron haas hulle soontoe. Lockhart staan agteruit. Daar is ’n trek van volslae angs op sy gesig.

Dit lyk soos ’n doodgewone wasbak. Hulle bekyk elke deeltjie, binne en buite, sowel as die pype aan die onderkant. Toe sien Harry dit: uitgekerf aan die kant van een van die koperkrane is ’n klein slangetjie.

“Daardie kraan wou nog nooit werk nie,” sê Katryn hulpvaardig toe hy dit probeer oopdraai.

“Harry,” sê Ron, “sê iets. Sê iets in Parseltaal.”

“Maar —” Harry dink hard. Die enigste kere dat hy Parseltaal kon praat, was toe daar ’n regte slang voor hom was. Hy staar na die klein graving en probeer maak of dit regtig ’n slang is.

“Gaan oop,” sê hy.

Hy kyk na Ron, wat sy kop skud.

“Probeer weer,” sê hy.

Harry kyk weer na die slang en dwing homself om te glo dat dit lewend is. As hy sy kop draai, laat die kerslig dit lyk of dit beweeg.

“Gaan oop,” sê hy weer.

Maar hy hoor nie hierdie woorde nie. ’n Vreemde gesis kom oor sy lippe en onmiddellik gloei die kraan met ’n helderwit lig en tol in die rondte. Die volgende oomblik begin die wasbak beweeg. Om die waarheid te sê, die wasbak sak weg sodat dit verdwyn en ’n groot pyp, wyd genoeg sodat ’n mens daarin kan afgly, verskyn.

Harry hoor hoe Ron na asem snak en kyk weer op. Hy het klaar besluit wat hy gaan doen.

“Ek gaan af,” sê hy.

Noudat hulle die ingang na die Kamer gekry het, moet hy gaan, al is daar net die kleinste, geringste, wildste kans dat Ginny nog lewe.

“Ek ook,” sê Ron.

Daar is 'n stilte.

“Wel, dit lyk nie of julle my nodig het nie,” sê Lockhart met 'n skaduwee van sy ou glimlag. “Ek sal sommer –”

Hy sit sy hand op die deurknop, maar sowel Ron as Harry rig hul toewerstawwe op hom.

“Jy kan eerste gaan,” snou Ron hom toe.

Wit in die gesig en sonder 'n towerstaf stap Lockhart na die opening.

“Seuns,” sê hy swakkies, “seuns, wat sal dit tog help?”

Harry steek hom in die rug met sy towerstaf. Lockhart laat sak sy bene in die pyp.

“Ek dink regtig nie –” begin hy, maar Ron gee hom 'n stootjie en hy glip weg. Harry volg kort daarna. Hy laat sak homself stadig in die pyp en laat los.

Dis asof hy al langs 'n eindelose, glibberige, donker glybaan af snel. Hy sien meer pype wat in alle rigtings vertak, maar nie een is so groot soos hulle s'n wat kronkel en draai en steil afwaarts hel nie. Hy weet hy val dieper onder die skool in as wat selfs die kerkers is. Agter hom hoor hy hoe Ron met dowwe stampgeluide om die draaie kom.

En toe, net toe hy begin bekommerd raak oor wat gaan gebeur wanneer hy die grond tref, verander die helling sodat die pyp gelyk met die aarde loop, en hy skiet uit aan die punt en land met 'n klam doef op die vloer van 'n donker kliptonnel, groot genoeg dat 'n mens daarin kan staan. 'n Entjie verder kom Lockhart orent. Hy is vol slym en so wit soos 'n spook. Harry staan vinnig opsy toe Ron ook uit die pyp vlieg.

“Ons moet kilometers onder die skool wees,” sê Harry en sy stem eggo deur die swart tonnel.

“Onder die meer, dink ek,” sê Ron en loer skeeloog na die donker, slibberige mure.

Al drie van hulle draai en staar na die duisternis voor hulle.

“Lumos!” beveel Harry sy towerstaf en 'n liggie kom weer aan. “Komaan,” sê hy vir Ron en Lockhart en hulle stap aan. Hul voete klap hard op die waternat vloer.

Die tonnel is so donker dat hulle net 'n klein entjie voor hulle kan sien. Hul skaduwees teen die mure lyk monsteragtig groot in die towerstaf se lig.

“Onthou,” sê Harry saggies terwyl hulle behoedsaam vorentoe beweeg, “as julle iets sien roer, moet julle jul oë dadelik toemaak.”

Maar die tunnel is so stil soos 'n graf en die eerste onverwagte geluid wat hulle hoor, is 'n harde *kraak* toe Ron op iets trap wat blyk 'n rot se skedel te wees. Harry laat sak sy towerstaf om na die vloer te kyk en sien dat dit besaai is met beendere van klein diertjies. Hy doen sy bes om nie te wonder hoe Ginny sal lyk as hulle haar kry nie, en stap vooruit, om 'n donker draai in die tunnel.

"Harry, daar is iets daar voor . . ." sê Ron skor en gryp Harry se skouer. Hulle vries in hul spore en kyk. Harry kan net-net die buitelyne sien van iets wat groot en krom is en wat dwarsoor die tunnel lê. Dit roer nie.

"Dalk slaap dit," sê hy ademloos en kyk terug na die ander twee. Lockhart se hande is styf oor sy oë gedruk. Harry draai terug om na die ding te kyk. Sy hart klop so vinnig dat dit seermaak.

Stadig, en met sy oë so nou getrek as wat hy kan, kruip Harry vorentoe, sy towerstaf hoog in die lug.

Die liggie speel oor 'n ellelange slangvel in 'n helder, giftige groen, wat in kronkels oor die vloer van die tunnel lê. Dit is leeg. Die dier wat daaruit gekruip het, moet ten minste sewe meter lank wees.

"Sjoe," sê Ron floutjies.

Daar is 'n skielike beweging agter hulle. Gilderoy Lockhart se knieë het onder hom geswik.

"Staan op," sê Ron kwaai en rig sy towerstaf op hom.

Lockhart kom orent – toe duik hy op Ron af en stamp hom teen die grond.

Harry spring vorentoe, maar dis te laat. Lockhart kom reeds hygend orent, met Ron se towerstaf in sy hand en 'n stralende glimlag op sy gesig.

"Dis hier waar die avontuur tot 'n einde kom, seuns!" sê hy. "Ek sal 'n stukkie van hierdie vel skool toe neem en vir almal vertel dat ek te laat was om die dogter te red, en dat julle twee op *tragiese* wyse mal geword het toe julle haar verminkte liggaam sien. Sê vaarwel aan jul herinnerings, seuns!"

Hy lig Ron se vasgeplakte towerstaf hoog bo sy kop en gil, "Wis uit!"

Die towerstaf ontplof met die krag van 'n klein bom. Harry gooi sy arms oor sy kop en hardloop al glyende oor die kronkelende slangvel, om uit die pad van die groot stukke plafon te kom, wat donderend van bo af tuimel. Die volgende oomblik staan hy alleen en staar na 'n soliede muur van gebreekte klip.

"Ron!" roep hy uit. "Waar is jy? Is alles reg? Ron!"

"Ek is hier!" kom Ron se stem dofweg van agter die rotsstorting. "Ek makeer niks. Maar hierdie bobbejaan – die towerspreuk het hom getref!" 'n Gedempte slag en 'n harde "eina!" kan gehoor word. Dit klink of Ron vir Lockhart teen die skeen geskop het.

"Wat maak ons nou?" Ron se stem klink desperaat. "Ons kan nie deurkom nie. Dit sal eeue vat . . ."

Harry staar na die tunnel se dak. Groot krake het daarin verskyn. Hy het nog nooit tevore probeer om iets wat so groot soos hierdie rotse is, met towerkrag te breek nie, en dit lyk nie na die regte oomblik om nou te probeer nie – wat as die hele tunnel ineenstort?

Nog 'n slag en nog 'n “eina!” weerklink van agter die rotse. Hulle is besig om tyd te mors. Ginny is reeds vir ure in die Kamer van Geheime-nisse. Harry weet daar is net een ding om te doen.

“Wag hier,” roep hy na Ron. “Bly by Lockhart. Ek sal verder gaan. As ek nie binne 'n uur terug is nie . . .”

Daar is 'n gespanne stilte.

“Ek sal die klippe probeer verskuif,” sê Ron en dit klink of hy sy stem probeer gelyk hou. “Dan kan jy – terugkom. En Harry –”

“Sien jou oor 'n rukkie,” sê Harry en probeer klink asof hy vol self-vertroue is, maar sy stem is bewurig.

Toe stap hy alleen verby die reuseslangvel.

Gou kan hy die geluid van Ron wat sukkel om die rotse te skuif, nie meer hoor nie. Die tunnel kronkel heen en weer. Elke senuwee in Harry se liggaam tintel onplesierig. Hy wil hê dat die tunnel moet end, maar hy is terselfdertyd doodbang vir wat aan die einde wag. Toe, uiteindelik, toe hy om nog 'n draai kruip, sien hy 'n soliede muur voor hom waarop twee verstrengelde slange gekerf is. Waar hul oë moet wees, is groot, glim-mende smaragde.

Harry se keel is droog toe hy nader stap. Dis glad nie nodig om hom te verbeel dat hierdie klipslange lewe nie, want hul oë lyk vreemd lewend.

Hy kan raai wat hy moet doen. Hy maak sy keel skoon en dit lyk of die smaraggroen oë flikker.

“Gaan oop,” sê Harry sissend.

Die slange krul uitmekaar, die muur gaan oop, die twee helftes gly gladweg tot buite sig en Harry, wat van kop tot tone bewe, stap in.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN

He was standing at the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

His heart beating very fast, Harry stood listening to the chill silence. Could the basilisk be lurking in a shadowy corner, behind a pillar? And where was Ginny?

He pulled out his wand and moved forward between the serpentine columns. Every careful footstep echoed loudly off the shadowy walls. He kept his eyes narrowed, ready to clamp them shut at the

smallest sign of movement. The hollow eye sockets of the stone snakes seemed to be following him. More than once, with a jolt of the stomach, he thought he saw one stir.

Then, as he drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall.

Harry had to crane his neck to look up into the giant face above: It was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous gray feet stood on the smooth Chamber floor. And between the feet, facedown, lay a small, black-robed figure with flaming-red hair.

"*Ginny!*" Harry muttered, sprinting to her and dropping to his knees. "Ginny — don't be dead — please don't be dead —" He flung his wand aside, grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and turned her over. Her face was white as marble, and as cold, yet her eyes were closed, so she wasn't Petrified. But then she must be —

"Ginny, please wake up," Harry muttered desperately, shaking her. Ginny's head lolled hopelessly from side to side.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and spun around on his knees.

A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though Harry were looking at him through a misted window. But there was no mistaking him —

"Tom — *Tom Riddle?*"

Riddle nodded, not taking his eyes off Harry's face.

"What d'you mean, she won't wake?" Harry said desperately.

“She’s not — she’s not — ?”

“She’s still alive,” said Riddle. “But only just.”

Harry stared at him. Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago, yet here he stood, a weird, misty light shining about him, not a day older than sixteen.

“Are you a ghost?” Harry said uncertainly.

“A memory,” said Riddle quietly. “Preserved in a diary for fifty years.”

He pointed toward the floor near the statue’s giant toes. Lying open there was the little black diary Harry had found in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. For a second, Harry wondered how it had got there — but there were more pressing matters to deal with.

“You’ve got to help me, Tom,” Harry said, raising Ginny’s head again. “We’ve got to get her out of here. There’s a basilisk . . . I don’t know where it is, but it could be along any moment. . . . Please, help me —”

Riddle didn’t move. Harry, sweating, managed to hoist Ginny half off the floor, and bent to pick up his wand again.

But his wand had gone.

“Did you see — ?”

He looked up. Riddle was still watching him — twirling Harry’s wand between his long fingers.

“Thanks,” said Harry, stretching out his hand for it.

A smile curled the corners of Riddle’s mouth. He continued to stare at Harry, twirling the wand idly.

“Listen,” said Harry urgently, his knees sagging with Ginny’s dead weight. “*We’ve got to go!* If the basilisk comes —”

“It won’t come until it is called,” said Riddle calmly.

Harry lowered Ginny back onto the floor, unable to hold her up any longer.

“What d’you mean?” he said. “Look, give me my wand, I might need it —”

Riddle’s smile broadened.

“You won’t be needing it,” he said.

Harry stared at him.

“What d’you mean, I won’t be — ?”

“I’ve waited a long time for this, Harry Potter,” said Riddle. “For the chance to see you. To speak to you.”

“Look,” said Harry, losing patience, “I don’t think you get it. We’re in the *Chamber of Secrets*. We can talk later —”

“We’re going to talk now,” said Riddle, still smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry’s wand.

Harry stared at him. There was something very funny going on here. . . .

“How did Ginny get like this?” he asked slowly.

“Well, that’s an interesting question,” said Riddle pleasantly. “And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley’s like this is because she opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger.”

“What are you talking about?” said Harry.

“The diary,” said Riddle. “*My* diary. Little Ginny’s been writing in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes — how her brothers *tease* her, how she had to come to school

with secondhand robes and books, how” — Riddle’s eyes glinted — “how she didn’t think famous, good, great Harry Potter would *ever* like her. . . .”

All the time he spoke, Riddle’s eyes never left Harry’s face. There was an almost hungry look in them.

“It’s very *boring*, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl,” he went on. “But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply *loved* me. *No one’s ever understood me like you, Tom. . . . I’m so glad I’ve got this diary to confide in. . . . It’s like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket. . . .*”

Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that didn’t suit him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of Harry’s neck.

“If I say it myself, Harry, I’ve always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted. . . . I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of *my* secrets, to start pouring a little of *my* soul back into *her* . . .”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry, whose mouth had gone very dry.

“Haven’t you guessed yet, Harry Potter?” said Riddle softly. “Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib’s cat.”

“No,” Harry whispered.

“Yes,” said Riddle calmly. “Of course, she didn’t *know* what she

was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries . . . far more interesting, they became. . . . *Dear Tom,*” he recited, watching Harry’s horrified face, *“I think I’m losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don’t know how they got there. Dear Tom, I can’t remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I’ve got paint all down my front. Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I’m pale and I’m not myself. I think he suspects me. . . . There was another attack today and I don’t know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I’m going mad. . . . I think I’m the one attacking everyone, Tom!”*

Harry’s fists were clenched, the nails digging deep into his palms.

“It took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary,” said Riddle. “But she finally became suspicious and tried to dispose of it. And that’s where *you* came in, Harry. You found it, and I couldn’t have been more delighted. Of all the people who could have picked it up, it was *you*, the very person I was most anxious to meet. . . .”

“And why did you want to meet me?” said Harry. Anger was coursing through him, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady.

“Well, you see, Ginny told me all about you, Harry,” said Riddle. “Your whole *fascinating* history.” His eyes roved over the lightning scar on Harry’s forehead, and their expression grew hungrier. “I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. So I decided to show you my famous capture of that great oaf, Hagrid, to gain your trust —”

“Hagrid’s my friend,” said Harry, his voice now shaking. “And

you framed him, didn't you? I thought you made a mistake, but —”

Riddle laughed his high laugh again.

“It was my word against Hagrid’s, Harry. Well, you can imagine how it looked to old Armando Dippet. On the one hand, Tom Riddle, poor but brilliant, parentless but so *brave*, school prefect, model student . . . on the other hand, big, blundering Hagrid, in trouble every other week, trying to raise werewolf cubs under his bed, sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest to wrestle trolls . . . but I admit, even *I* was surprised how well the plan worked. I thought *someone* must realize that Hagrid couldn’t possibly be the Heir of Slytherin. It had taken *me* five whole years to find out everything I could about the Chamber of Secrets and discover the secret entrance . . . as though Hagrid had the brains, or the power!

“Only the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, seemed to think Hagrid was innocent. He persuaded Dippet to keep Hagrid and train him as gamekeeper. Yes, I think Dumbledore might have guessed. . . . Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did. . . .”

“I bet Dumbledore saw right through you,” said Harry, his teeth gritted.

“Well, he certainly kept an annoyingly close watch on me after Hagrid was expelled,” said Riddle carelessly. “I knew it wouldn’t be safe to open the Chamber again while I was still at school. But I wasn’t going to waste those long years I’d spent searching for it. I decided to leave behind a diary, preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead another in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin’s noble work.”

“Well, you haven’t finished it,” said Harry triumphantly. “No one’s died this time, not even the cat. In a few hours the Mandrake Draught will be ready and everyone who was Petrified will be all right again —”

“Haven’t I already told you,” said Riddle quietly, “that killing Mudbloods doesn’t matter to me anymore? For many months now, my new target has been — *you*.”

Harry stared at him.

“Imagine how angry I was when the next time my diary was opened, it was Ginny who was writing to me, not you. She saw you with the diary, you see, and panicked. What if you found out how to work it, and I repeated all her secrets to you? What if, even worse, I told you who’d been strangling roosters? So the foolish little brat waited until your dormitory was deserted and stole it back. But I knew what I must do. It was clear to me that you were on the trail of Slytherin’s heir. From everything Ginny had told me about you, I knew you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery — particularly if one of your best friends was attacked. And Ginny had told me the whole school was buzzing because you could speak Parseltongue. . . .

“So I made Ginny write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. She struggled and cried and became *very* boring. But there isn’t much life left in her. . . . She put too much into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last. . . . I have been waiting for you to appear since we arrived here. I knew you’d come. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter.”

“Like what?” Harry spat, fists still clenched.

“Well,” said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, “how is it that *you* — a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent — managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did *you* escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort’s powers were destroyed?”

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now.

“Why do you care how I escaped?” said Harry slowly. “Voldemort was after your time. . . .”

“Voldemort,” said Riddle softly, “is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter. . . .”

He pulled Harry’s wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

“You see?” he whispered. “It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father’s name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother’s side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry — I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!”

Harry’s brain seemed to have jammed. He stared numbly at Riddle, at the orphaned boy who had grown up to murder Harry’s own parents, and so many others. . . . At last he forced himself to

speak.

“You’re not,” he said, his quiet voice full of hatred.

“Not what?” snapped Riddle.

“Not the greatest sorcerer in the world,” said Harry, breathing fast. “Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn’t dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you’re hiding these days —”

The smile had gone from Riddle’s face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

“Dumbledore’s been driven out of this castle by the mere *memory* of me!” he hissed.

“He’s not as gone as you might think!” Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true —

Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled around to stare down the empty Chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry’s scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size. Then, as the music reached such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs, flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as a peacock’s and gleaming golden talons, which were gripping a ragged

bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Harry. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and a beady black eye.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Harry's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle.

"That's a phoenix. . . ." said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"*Fawkes?*" Harry breathed, and he felt the bird's golden claws squeeze his shoulder gently.

"And *that* — " said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "that's the old school Sorting Hat —"

So it was. Patched, frayed, and dirty, the hat lay motionless at Harry's feet.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark Chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once —

"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry didn't answer. He might not see what use Fawkes or the Sorting Hat were, but he was no longer alone, and he waited for Riddle to stop laughing with his courage mounting.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice — in *your* past, in *my* future — we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. *How did you survive?* Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "the longer you stay alive."

Harry was thinking fast, weighing his chances. Riddle had the wand. He, Harry, had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, neither of which

would be much good in a duel. It looked bad, all right . . . but the longer Riddle stood there, the more life was dwindling out of Ginny . . . and in the meantime, Harry noticed suddenly, Riddle's outline was becoming clearer, more solid. . . . If it had to be a fight between him and Riddle, better sooner than later.

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Harry abruptly. "I don't know myself. But I know why you couldn't *kill* me. Because my mother died to save me. My common *Muggle-born* mother," he added, shaking with suppressed rage. "She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul —"

Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile.

"So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful counter-charm. I can see now . . . there is nothing special about you, after all. I wondered, you see. Because there are strange likenesses between us, Harry Potter. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even *look* something alike. . . . But after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know."

Harry stood, tense, waiting for Riddle to raise his wand. But Riddle's twisted smile was widening again.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him. . . ."

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then

walked away. Harry, fear spreading up his numb legs, watched Riddle stop between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed — but Harry understood what he was saying. . . .

“Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four.”

Harry wheeled around to look up at the statue, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder.

Slytherin’s gigantic stone face was moving. Horrorstruck, Harry saw his mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole.

And something was stirring inside the statue’s mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths.

Harry backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and as he shut his eyes tight he felt Fawkes’ wing sweep his cheek as he took flight. Harry wanted to shout, “Don’t leave me!” but what chance did a phoenix have against the king of serpents?

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt it shudder — he knew what was happening, he could sense it, could almost see the giant serpent uncoiling itself from Slytherin’s mouth. Then he heard Riddle’s hissing voice:

“Kill him.”

The basilisk was moving toward Harry; he could hear its heavy body slithering heavily across the dusty floor. Eyes still tightly shut, Harry began to run blindly sideways, his hands outstretched, feeling his way — Voldemort was laughing —

Harry tripped. He fell hard onto the stone and tasted blood — the serpent was barely feet from him, he could hear it coming —

There was a loud, explosive spitting sound right above him, and then something heavy hit Harry so hard that he was smashed into the wall. Waiting for fangs to sink through his body, he heard more mad hissing, something thrashing wildly off the pillars —

He couldn't help it — he opened his eyes wide enough to squint at what was going on.

The enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green, thick as an oak trunk, had raised itself high in the air and its great blunt head was weaving drunkenly between the pillars. As Harry trembled, ready to close his eyes if it turned, he saw what had distracted the snake.

Fawkes was soaring around its head, and the basilisk was snapping furiously at him with fangs long and thin as sabers —

Fawkes dived. His long golden beak sank out of sight and a sudden shower of dark blood splattered the floor. The snake's tail thrashed, narrowly missing Harry, and before Harry could shut his eyes, it turned — Harry looked straight into its face and saw that its eyes, both its great, bulbous yellow eyes, had been punctured by the phoenix; blood was streaming to the floor, and the snake was spitting in agony.

“NO!” Harry heard Riddle screaming. *“LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM! KILL HIM!”*

The blinded serpent swayed, confused, still deadly. Fawkes was circling its head, piping his eerie song, jabbing here and there at its scaly nose as the blood poured from its ruined eyes.

“Help me, help me,” Harry muttered wildly, “someone — anyone —”

The snake's tail whipped across the floor again. Harry ducked. Something soft hit his face.

The basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry's arms. Harry seized it. It was all he had left, his only chance — he rammed it onto his head and threw himself flat onto the floor as the basilisk's tail swung over him again.

Help me — help me — Harry thought, his eyes screwed tight under the hat. *Please help me —*

There was no answering voice. Instead, the hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.

Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.

A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

“KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! SNIFF — SMELL HIM!”

Harry was on his feet, ready. The basilisk's head was falling, its body coiling around, hitting pillars as it twisted to face him. He could see the vast, bloody eye sockets, see the mouth stretching wide, wide enough to swallow him whole, lined with fangs long as his sword, thin, glittering, venomous —

It lunged blindly — Harry dodged and it hit the Chamber wall. It lunged again, and its forked tongue lashed Harry's side. He raised the sword in both his hands —

The basilisk lunged again, and this time its aim was true — Harry

threw his whole weight behind the sword and drove it to the hilt into the roof of the serpent's mouth —

But as warm blood drenched Harry's arms, he felt a searing pain just above his elbow. One long, poisonous fang was sinking deeper and deeper into his arm and it splintered as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, to the floor.

Harry slid down the wall. He gripped the fang that was spreading poison through his body and wrenched it out of his arm. But he knew it was too late. White-hot pain was spreading slowly and steadily from the wound. Even as he dropped the fang and watched his own blood soaking his robes, his vision went foggy. The Chamber was dissolving in a whirl of dull color.

A patch of scarlet swam past, and Harry heard a soft clatter of claws beside him.

"Fawkes," said Harry thickly. "You were fantastic, Fawkes. . . ." He felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the spot where the serpent's fang had pierced him.

He could hear echoing footsteps and then a dark shadow moved in front of him.

"You're dead, Harry Potter," said Riddle's voice above him. "Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Do you see what he's doing, Potter? He's crying."

Harry blinked. Fawkes's head slid in and out of focus. Thick, pearly tears were trickling down the glossy feathers.

"I'm going to sit here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Harry felt drowsy. Everything around him seemed to be spinning.

“So ends the famous Harry Potter,” said Riddle’s distant voice. “Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by his friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You’ll be back with your dear Mudblood mother soon, Harry. . . . She bought you twelve years of borrowed time . . . but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must. . . .”

If this is dying, thought Harry, it’s not so bad.

Even the pain was leaving him. . . .

But was this dying? Instead of going black, the Chamber seemed to be coming back into focus. Harry gave his head a little shake and there was Fawkes, still resting his head on Harry’s arm. A pearly patch of tears was shining all around the wound — except that there *was* no wound —

“Get away, bird,” said Riddle’s voice suddenly. “Get away from him — I said, *get away* —”

Harry raised his head. Riddle was pointing Harry’s wand at Fawkes; there was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again in a whirl of gold and scarlet.

“Phoenix tears . . .” said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry’s arm. “Of course . . . healing powers . . . I forgot . . .”

He looked into Harry’s face. “But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter . . . you and me. . . .”

He raised the wand —

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry’s lap — *the diary*.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it. Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he

had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the heart of the book.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, streaming over Harry's hands, flooding the floor. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then —

He had gone. Harry's wand fell to the floor with a clatter and there was silence. Silence except for the steady *drip drip* of ink still oozing from the diary. The basilisk venom had burned a sizzling hole right through it.

Shaking all over, Harry pulled himself up. His head was spinning as though he'd just traveled miles by Floo powder. Slowly, he gathered together his wand and the Sorting Hat, and, with a huge tug, retrieved the glittering sword from the roof of the basilisk's mouth.

Then came a faint moan from the end of the Chamber. Ginny was stirring. As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused eyes traveled from the huge form of the dead basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary in his hand. She drew a great, shuddering gasp and tears began to pour down her face.

"Harry — oh, Harry — I tried to tell you at b-breakfast, but I *couldn't* say it in front of Percy — it was *me*, Harry — but I — I swear I d-didn't mean to — R-Riddle made me, he t-took me over — and — *how* did you kill that — that thing? W-where's Riddle? The last thing I r-remember is him coming out of the diary —"

"It's all right," said Harry, holding up the diary, and showing Ginny the fang hole, "Riddle's finished. Look! Him *and* the basilisk. C'mon, Ginny, let's get out of here —"

"I'm going to be expelled!" Ginny wept as Harry helped her

awkwardly to her feet. “I’ve looked forward to coming to Hogwarts ever since B-Bill came and n-now I’ll have to leave and — *w-what ’ll Mum and Dad say?*”

Fawkes was waiting for them, hovering in the Chamber entrance. Harry urged Ginny forward; they stepped over the motionless coils of the dead basilisk, through the echoing gloom, and back into the tunnel. Harry heard the stone doors close behind them with a soft hiss.

After a few minutes’ progress up the dark tunnel, a distant sound of slowly shifting rock reached Harry’s ears.

“Ron!” Harry yelled, speeding up. “Ginny’s okay! I’ve got her!”

He heard Ron give a strangled cheer, and they turned the next bend to see his eager face staring through the sizable gap he had managed to make in the rockfall.

“*Ginny!*” Ron thrust an arm through the gap in the rock to pull her through first. “You’re alive! I don’t believe it! What happened? How — what — where did that bird come from?”

Fawkes had swooped through the gap after Ginny.

“He’s Dumbledore’s,” said Harry, squeezing through himself.

“How come you’ve got a *sword*?” said Ron, gazing at the glittering weapon in Harry’s hand.

“I’ll explain when we get out of here,” said Harry with a sideways glance at Ginny, who was crying harder than ever.

“But —”

“Later,” Harry said shortly. He didn’t think it was a good idea to tell Ron yet who’d been opening the Chamber, not in front of Ginny, anyway. “Where’s Lockhart?”

“Back there,” said Ron, still looking puzzled but jerking his head up the tunnel toward the pipe. “He’s in a bad way. Come and see.”

Led by Fawkes, whose wide scarlet wings emitted a soft golden glow in the darkness, they walked all the way back to the mouth of the pipe. Gilderoy Lockhart was sitting there, humming placidly to himself.

“His memory’s gone,” said Ron. “The Memory Charm backfired. Hit him instead of us. Hasn’t got a clue who he is, or where he is, or who we are. I told him to come and wait here. He’s a danger to himself.”

Lockhart peered good-naturedly up at them all.

“Hello,” he said. “Odd sort of place, this, isn’t it? Do you live here?”

“No,” said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry bent down and looked up the long, dark pipe.

“Have you thought how we’re going to get back up this?” he said to Ron.

Ron shook his head, but Fawkes the phoenix had swooped past Harry and was now fluttering in front of him, his beady eyes bright in the dark. He was waving his long golden tail feathers. Harry looked uncertainly at him.

“He looks like he wants you to grab hold . . .” said Ron, looking perplexed. “But you’re much too heavy for a bird to pull up there —”

“Fawkes,” said Harry, “isn’t an ordinary bird.” He turned quickly to the others. “We’ve got to hold on to each other. Ginny, grab Ron’s hand. Professor Lockhart —”

“He means you,” said Ron sharply to Lockhart.

“You hold Ginny’s other hand —”

Harry tucked the sword and the Sorting Hat into his belt, Ron took hold of the back of Harry’s robes, and Harry reached out and took hold of Fawkes’s strangely hot tail feathers.

An extraordinary lightness seemed to spread through his whole body and the next second, in a rush of wings, they were flying upward through the pipe. Harry could hear Lockhart dangling below him, saying, “Amazing! Amazing! This is just like magic!” The chill air was whipping through Harry’s hair, and before he’d stopped enjoying the ride, it was over — all four of them were hitting the wet floor of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, and as Lockhart straightened his hat, the sink that hid the pipe was sliding back into place.

Myrtle goggled at them.

“You’re alive,” she said blankly to Harry.

“There’s no need to sound so disappointed,” he said grimly, wiping flecks of blood and slime off his glasses.

“Oh, well . . . I’d just been thinking . . . if you had died, you’d have been welcome to share my toilet,” said Myrtle, blushing silver.

“Urgh!” said Ron as they left the bathroom for the dark, deserted corridor outside. “Harry! I think Myrtle’s grown *fond* of you! You’ve got competition, Ginny!”

But tears were still flooding silently down Ginny’s face.

“Where now?” said Ron, with an anxious look at Ginny. Harry pointed.

Fawkes was leading the way, glowing gold along the corridor. They strode after him, and moments later, found themselves outside Professor McGonagall’s office.

Harry knocked and pushed the door open.

Die Erfgenaam van Slibberin

Hy staan aan die einde van 'n baie lang, swak verligte vertrek. Reusagtige klippilare, versier met nog meer gesnede slange, toring opwaarts tot by die plafon wat verlore in die duisternis is, en gooi lang swart skaduwees deur die vreemde groenerige skemer wat die plek vul.

Met 'n hart wat baie vinnig klop, staan Harry na die koue stilte en luis-ter. Skuil die Basilisk hier iewers in 'n donker hoek, agter 'n pilaar? En waar is Ginny?

Hy haal sy towerstaf uit en beweeg tussen die slangbedekte pilare deur. Elke behoedsame voetstap galm van die skemer mure af. Hy hou sy oë op skrefies, gereed om hulle toe te knyp by die geringste teken van iets wat beweeg. Dis of die hol oogkasse van die klipslange hom volg. Meer as een keer dink hy, met 'n skielike rukking in sy maag, dat hy een sien roer.

Toe hy regoor die laaste paar pilare kom, doem 'n standbeeld wat so hoog soos die Kamer self is en agter teen die verste muur staan, voor hom op.

Harry moet sy nek agteroor buig om in die reusegesig te kan kyk: dit is eeue oud en aapagtig, met 'n lang, dun baardjie wat amper tot by die soom van die towenaar se sierlike klipkleed hang, waar twee enorme grys voete op die gladde vloer van die kamer staan. Tussen die voete lê 'n klein figuurtjie in 'n swart kleed en vlammeende rooi hare, met haar gesig teen die vloer.

"Ginny!" prewel Harry. Hy storm nader en val op sy knieë langs haar. "Ginny! Moenie dood wees nie! Moet asseblief nie dood wees nie!" Hy gooi sy towerstaf neer, gryp Ginny aan die skouers en draai haar om. Haar gesig is so wit soos marmer en so koud ook, maar haar oë is toe. Sy is dus nie Versteen nie. Maar dan moet sy . . .

"Ginny, word asseblief wakker," mompel Harry terwyl hy haar wan-hopig skud. Ginny se kop rol hulpeloos van kant tot kant.

"Sy sal nie wakker word nie," sê 'n sagte stem.

Harry wip en draai op sy knieë om.

'n Lang seun met swart hare leun teen die naaste pilaar. Hy lyk vreemd dof om die kante, asof Harry deur 'n wasige venster na hom kyk. Maar daar is geen twyfel oor wie hy is nie.

“Erik – Erik Dhoewels?”

Dhoewels knik, maar hy neem nie sy oë van Harry se gesig af nie.

“Wat bedoel jy, sy sal nie wakker word nie?” sê Harry desperaat. “Sy’s nie – sy is tog nie –?”

“Sy lewe,” sê Dhoewels, “maar ook net.”

Harry staar na hom. Erik Dhoewels was vyftig jaar gelede by Hogwarts, maar hier staan hy, ’n vreemde, mistige lig skyn om hom en hy lyk nie ’n dag ouer as sestien nie.

“Is jy ’n spook?” vra Harry onseker.

“’n Herinnering,” sê Dhoewels bedaard. “Bewaar in ’n dagboek vir vyftig jaar.”

Hy wys na die vloer langs die standbeeld se reusetone, waar die klein swart dagboekie wat Harry in Katryn Kermkous se badkamer gekry het, oop lê. Vir ’n oomblik wonder Harry hoe dit daar gekom het – maar daar is belangriker sake om af te handel.

“Jy moet my help, Erik.” Weer lig Harry Ginny se kop. “Ons moet haar hier uitkry. Daar’s ’n Basilisk . . . ek weet nie waar dit nou is nie, maar dit kan enige oomblik hier wees. Asseblief, help my . . .”

Dhoewels roer nie. Harry sukkel swetend om vir Ginny op te lig, en buk om sy towerstaf ook op te tel.

Sy towerstaf is nie meer daar nie.

“Het jy dalk my – ?”

Hy kyk op. Dhoewels hou hom nog steeds dop – hy speel met Harry se towerstaf tussen sy lang vingers.

“O, dankie,” sê Harry en steek sy hand uit.

’n Glimlag krul om Dhoewels se mondhoeke. Hy staar nog steeds na Harry, terwyl hy die towerstaf luiweg tussen sy vingers draai.

“Luister,” sê Harry dringend, want sy knieë swik onder Ginny se dooiegewig, “ons moet gaan! As daardie Basilisk kom . . .”

“Hy kom net wanneer hy geroep word,” sê Dhoewels kalm.

Harry laat sak vir Ginny terug op die vloer. Hy kan haar nie langer vashou nie.

“Wat bedoel jy?” sê hy. “Kyk, gee my towerstaf; ek kry dit dalk nodig.”

Dhoewels se glimlag word breër.

“Jy sal dit nie nodig kry nie,” sê hy.

Harry gaap hom aan.

“Wat bedoel jy, ek sal dit nie – ?”

“Ek het lank hiervoor gewag, Harry Potter,” sê Dhoewels. “Vir die kans om jou te sien. Met jou te praat.”

“Kyk,” sê Harry, wat nou goed ongeduldig is, “ek dink nie jy verstaan so lekker wat hier aangaan nie. Ons is in die *Kamer van Geheimenisse*. Ons kan later praat.”

“Ons gaan nou praat,” sê Dhoewels, terwyl hy nog steeds breed glimlag en Harry se towerstaf in sy sak steek.

Harry staar na hom. Hier is iets baie vreemds aan die gang.

“Wat het Ginny oorgekom?” vra hy stadig.

“Wel, dis ’n interessante vraag,” sê Dhoewels plesierig. “En nogal ’n lang storie. Ek veronderstel die ware rede waarom Ginny Weasley so lyk is omdat sy haar hart oopgemaak het en al haar geheime aan ’n onsigbare vreemdeling uitgelap het.”

“Waarvan praat jy?” vra Harry.

“Die dagboek,” sê Dhoewels. “My dagboek. Klein Ginny het vir maande en maande daarin geskryf en al haar jammerlike geheimpies met my gedeel: hoe haar broers haar terg, hoe sy skool toe moes kom met tweedehandse klere en boeke, hoe –” Dhoewels se oë glinster, “– hoe sy vrees dat die wonderlike, beroemde, groot, goeie Harry Potter nooit ooit van haar gaan hou nie . . .”

Die hele tyd dat hy praat, bly Dhoewels se oë op Harry gerig. Daar is amper ’n honger blik in sy kykers.

“Dit is natuurlik baie vervelig om na die lawwe probleempies van ’n elfjarige meisietjie te moet luister,” gaan hy voort. “Maar ek was geduldig. Ek het teruggeskryf, ek was simpatiek, ek was gaaf. Ginny was *mal* oor my. *Niemand het my nog ooit verstaan soos jy nie, Erik . . . Ek is so bly dat ek hierdie dagboek het om in te skryf . . . Dis soos ’n vriend wat ek in my sak kan dra . . .*”

Dhoewels lag, ’n hoë, koue lag wat glad nie by hom pas nie. Dit laat die hare in Harry se nek regop staan.

“As ek dit self mag sê, Harry, ek kon mense nog altyd bekoor as ek moet. Ginny het haar hele siel teenoor my uitgestort en haar siel was presies wat ek nodig gehad het. Ek het sterker en sterker geword op ’n dieet van haar diepste vrese, haar donkerste geheime. Ek het magtig geword, baie magtiger as klein juffrou Weasley. Magtig genoeg om vir juffrou Weasley ’n paar van my geheime te voer, om ’n bietjie van my siel in haar te laat vloei . . .”

“Wat bedoel jy nou eintlik?” sê Harry, wie se mond nou baie droog is.

“Het jy nog nie geraai nie, Harry Potter?” sê Dhoewels sag. “Ginny Weasley het die Kamer van Geheimenisse oopgemaak. Sy het die skool se hoenderhane nek omgedraai en dreigende boodskappe teen die mure gevef. Sy het die Slang van Slibberin op vier Modderbloeders gesit en op daardie Sisser se kat.”

“Nee,” fluister Harry.

“Ja,” sê Dhoewels bedaard. “Natuurlik het sy aanvanklik nie geweet wat sy doen nie. Dit was baie vermaaklik. Ek wens jy kon sien wat sy toe in haar dagboek geskryf het . . . Baie interessanter as tevore . . . ‘Liewe Erik’,” dra hy voor, terwyl hy Harry se geskokte gesig fyn dophou, “‘ek

dink ek is besig om my geheue te verloor. Daar is hoendervere oral oor my mantel en ek weet nie hoe dit daar gekom het nie. Liewe Erik, ek kan nie onthou wat ek op Allerheiligeaand gedoen het nie, maar 'n kat is aangeval en daar is verf op my kleed. Liewe Erik, Percy sê aanmekaar ek is bleek en nie myself nie. Ek dink hy vermoed iets . . . Nog iemand is vandag aangerand en ek weet nie waar ek was nie. Erik, wat gaan ek doen? Ek dink ek word mal . . . Ek dink ek is die een wat almal aanval, Erik!”

Harry se vuiste is gebal en sy naels maak kepe in sy palms.

“Dit het lank gevat voor klein, dom Ginny opgehou het om haar dagboek te vertrou,” sê Dhoewels. “Uiteindelik het sy agterdogtig geraak en probeer om daarvan ontslae te raak. En dis waar jy inpas, Harry. Jy het dit gekry en ek kon nie vir meer vra nie. Van al die mense wat dit kon optel, was jy die een persoon wat ek die graagste wou ontmoet . . .”

“Hoekom wou jy my ontmoet?” sê Harry. Hy is ontsettend kwaad en dis moeilik om sy stem kalm te hou.

“Wel, jy sien, Ginny het my alles oor jou vertel, Harry,” sê Dhoewels. “Jou hele *betowerende* geskiedenis.” Sy oë speel oor die litteken in die vorm van 'n weerligstraal op Harry se voorkop, en sy uitdrukking word hongeriger. “Ek het geweet ek moet meer oor jou uitvind, met jou praat, jou ontmoet as ek kan. Dis hoekom ek besluit het om vir jou te wys hoe ek daardie groot idioot Hagrid gevang het, om jou vertrou te wen.”

“Hagrid is my vriend,” sê Harry en nou bewe sy stem. “En jy het hom vals beskuldig, nie waar nie? Ek het gedink jy't 'n fout gemaak, maar —”

Weer gee Dhoewels sy hoë laggie.

“Dit was my woord teen Hagrid s'n, Harry. Wel, jy kan net dink hoe dit vir ou Armando Dippet gelyk het. Aan die een kant, Erik Dhoewels, arm maar briljant, sonder ouers, maar so *dapper*, skoolprefek, modelstudent; aan die ander kant, groot, lomp Hagrid wat gedurig in die moeilikheid is en jong weerwolfies onder sy bed grootmaak, wat wegglip na die Verbode Woud om met trolle te stoei. Ek moet egter erken, selfs *ek* was verbaas oor hoe goed my plan gewerk het. Ek het gedink *iemand* sal darem seker besef dat Hagrid onmoontlik die Erfgenaam van Slibberin kan wees. Dit het my vyf volle jare geneem om alles oor die Kamer van Geheimenisse uit te vind en om die geheime ingang te ontdek . . . waar sou Hagrid die verstand vandaan kry?

“Net die Transfigurasie-onderwyser, Dompeldorius, het gedink dat Hagrid onskuldig is. Hy het Dippet oorreed om Hagrid te hou en hom as boswagter op te lei. Ja, ek dink Dompeldorius het dalk geraai. Hy het nooit so baie van my gehou soos die ander onderwysers nie . . .”

“Ek wed jou Dompeldorius het dwarsdeur jou gesien,” sê Harry en kners op sy tande.

“Wel, hy het gewis 'n baie lastige ogie op my gehou na Hagrid geskors

is,” sê Dhoewels sorgeloos. “Ek het geweet dit sal nie veilig wees om die Kamer weer oop te maak terwyl ek nog op skool is nie. Maar ek was nie van plan om al die lange jare wat ek gesoek het, net so te mors nie. Ek het besluit om ’n dagboek agter te laat en my sestienjarige self daarin te bewaar, sodat ek iemand anders eendag, as ek gelukkig is, in my spore kan lei om Salazar Slibberin se edele werk klaar te maak.”

“Wel, jy is nog nie klaar nie,” sê Harry triomfantlik. “Hierdie keer is niemand dood nie, nie eens die kat nie. Oor ’n paar uur sal die alruin-drankie reg wees en almal wat Versteen is sal weer lewe.”

“Het ek nie vir jou gesê,” sê Dhoewels bedaard, “dat om Modderbloeders dood te maak, nie meer vir my belangrik is nie? Reeds vir baie maande het ek ’n nuwe teiken – jy.”

Harry staar na hom.

“Kan jy dink hoe kwaad ek was toe my dagboek weer oopgemaak word, en dit Ginny is wat aan my skryf en nie jy nie? Sy het jou met die dagboek gesien en behoorlik geskrik. Wat as jy uitvind hoe dit werk en ek al haar geheime aan jou oorvertel? Erger, wat as ek vir jou sê dit was sy wat die hoenderhane nek omgedraai het? Die dom klein sot het gewag tot jul slaapsaal leeg is en dit teruggesteel. Maar ek het geweet wat ek moet doen. Dit was duidelik dat jy op die spoor van Slibberin se Erfgenaam was. Van wat Ginny oor jou vertel het, het ek geweet dat jy alles in jou vermoë sal doen om die geheim op te los – veral as een van jou beste vriende aangeval is. En Ginny het vir my gesê dat die hele skool in oproer is omdat jy Parseltaal kan praat . . .

“Dus het ek vir Ginny haar eie vaarwel op die muur laat skryf en haar hier laat wag. Sy het geworstel en gehuil en baie vervelig geraak. Maar daar is nie veel meer lewe in haar nie: sy het te veel in die dagboek, in my, gesit. Genoeg dat ek die blaaië uiteindelik kon verlaat. Ek wag al vir jou vandat ons hier aangekom het. Ek het geweet jy sal kom. Ek het baie vroeë, Harry Potter.”

“Soos wat?” spoeg Harry dit uit. Sy vuiste is nog steeds gebal.

“Wel,” sê Dhoewels en hy glimlag plesierig, “hoe kon ’n baba sonder buitengewone toortalent die grootste towenaar van alle tye verslaan? Hoe het jy dit reggekry om net ’n litteken oor te hou, terwyl heer Woldemort se magte verwoes is?”

Nou is daar ’n vreemde rooi gloed in sy honger kykers.

“Wat traak dit jou hoe ek ontkom het?” sê Harry stadig. “Woldemort is na jou tyd.”

“Woldemort,” sê Dhoewels sag, “is my verlede, my hede en my toekomst, Harry Potter . . .”

Hy haal Harry se towerstaf uit sy sak, trek dit deur die lug en skryf drie glimmende woorde:

ERIK MORTE DHOEWELS

Weer waai hy die towerstaf, en die letters van sy naam skuif rond en skryf:

EK IS HEER WOLDEMORT

“Sien jy?” fluister hy. “Dit is ’n naam wat ek al by Hogwarts gebruik het, natuurlik net teenoor my beste vriende. Jy dink tog nie dat ek my vieslike Moggelpa se naam vir altyd moes gebruik nie, of hoe? Ek, in wie se are die bloed van Salazar Slibberin van moederskant vloei? Moet ek die naam van ’n doodgewone, verfoeilike Moggel behou? Iemand wat my kort na my geboorte in die steek gelaat het toe hy uitvind dat sy vrou ’n heks is? Nee, Harry. Ek het vir myself ’n nuwe naam geskep, ’n naam wat ek geweet het towenaars regoor die wêreld eendag te bang sal wees om te sê – die dag toe ek die grootste towenaar in die wêreld geword het!”

Dis of Harry se brein vasgehaak het. Heeltemal verstom staar hy na Dhoewels, die weeskind wat grootgeword het en Harry se eie ouers vermoor het, en ook soveel ander . . . Uiteindelik dwing hy homself om te praat.

“Jy is nie,” sê hy en sy stem is kalm en vol haat.

“Nie wat nie?” snou Dhoewels hom toe.

“Nie die grootste towenaar in die wêreld nie,” sê Harry en hy haal vin-nig asem. “Jammer om jou teleur te stel, maar die grootste towenaar in die wêreld is Albus Dompeldorius. Almal sê so. Selfs toe jy sterk was, het jy dit nie gewaag om Hogwarts te probeer oorneem nie. Dompeldorius het deur jou gesien toe jy nog op skool was en jy is nou nog vir hom bang, waar jy ook al deesdae wegkruip.”

Die glimlag verdwyn van Dhoewels se gesig en ’n lelike uitdrukking verskyn in sy oë.

“Dompeldorius is uit hierdie kasteel verdryf deur die blote *herinnering* aan my!” sis hy.

“Hy’s nie so ver weg as wat jy dink nie!” kap Harry terug. Hy sê som-mer enige ding waaraan hy kan dink. Hy wil Dhoewels bang maak, en hy wens dat alles wat hy sê, werklik *waar* is.

Dhoewels maak sy mond oop, maar vries.

Musiek klink van iewers af op. Dhoewels swaai om en staar oor die leë vertrek. Die musiek word harder. Dit is vreemd, tintelend, onaards; dit laat die hare op Harry se kop rys en dit voel of sy hart swel tot dit twee maal so groot as normaalweg is. Toe die musiek so hard is dat Harry dit binne-in sy ribbekas voel vibreer, bars daar vlamme uit die bopunt van die naaste pilaar.

’n Karmosynrooi voël, so groot soos ’n swaan, verskyn. Sy vreemde gesing styg tot teen die plafonkoepel. Dit het ’n glinsterende goue stert so lank soos ’n pou s’n en glimmende goue kloue wat ’n verflenterde bon-del vashou.

’n Oomblik later vlieg die voël reguit na Harry. Dit laat val die bondel

toilings aan sy voete en gaan sit swaar op Harry se skouer. Toe die reu-sevlerke toegevou is, kyk Harry op en sien 'n lang, skerp, goue snawel en swart kraalogies.

Die voël het ophou sing. Dit sit styf teen Harry se wang, stil en warm, en staar stip na Dhoewels.

“Dis 'n feniks . . .” sê Dhoewels, terwyl hy berekend na die voël kyk.

“Fawkes?” sê Harry en hy voel hoe die voël se goue kloue sy skouer liggies druk.

“En dit –” sê Dhoewels en staar na die smerige bondel wat Fawkes laat val het, “is die skool se ou Sorteerhoed.”

Hy is reg. Gelap, rafelrig en vuil, lê die hoed bewegingloos aan Harry se voete.

Weer begin Dhoewels lag. Hy lag so hard dat die donker kamer weer-galm asof tien Dhoewels tegelykertyd lag.

“So dit is wat Dompeldorius vir sy ondersteuner stuur! 'n Sangvoël en 'n ou hoed! Voel jy dapper, Harry Potter? Voel jy nou veilig?”

Harry antwoord nie. Hy weet wel nie wat hy nou eintlik met Fawkes en die Sorteerhoed moet doen nie, maar hy is ten minste nie meer alleen nie en terwyl hy wag dat Dhoewels moet ophou lag, voel hy hoe sy moed styg.

“Nou vir besigheid, Harry,” sê Dhoewels, wat nog steeds breed glimlag. “Twee keer in jou verlede, in my toekoms – het ons ontmoet. Twee keer kon ek jou nie doodmaak nie. *Hoe het jy oorleef?* Vertel my alles. Hoe langer jy praat,” voeg hy saggies by, “hoe langer sal jy bly leef.”

Harry dink vinnig terwyl hy sy kanse opweeg. Dhoewels het die towerstaf. Hy wat Harry is het vir Fawkes en die Sorteerhoed. Nie een van die twee sal veel werd wees in 'n tweegeveg nie. Dinge lyk nie goed nie. Maar hoe langer Dhoewels daar staan, hoe swakker word die lewe in Ginny . . . en skielik let Harry op dat Dhoewels se buitelyn helderder, meer solied word. As daar 'n geveg tussen hom en Dhoewels moet wees, dan eerder *nou* as later.

“Niemand weet hoekom jy jou magte verloor het toe jy my aangeval het nie,” sê Harry pront. “Ek weet ook nie. Ek weet wel hoekom jy my nie kon doodmaak nie. Omdat my ma gesterf het om my te red. My ma met haar *doodgewone* Moggelouers,” voeg hy by, terwyl hy van onder-drukte woede bewee. “Sy het gekeer dat jy my doodmaak. En ek het die ware jy laas jaar gesien. Jy's 'n wrak. Jy lewe skaars. Dis wat al jou mag aan jou gedoen het. Jy moet wegkruip. Jy is vieslik, jy's verfoeilik!”

Dhoewels se gesig vertrek. Toe dwing hy homself om aaklig te glimlag.

“Jou ma het dus gesterf om jou te red. Ja, dit is 'n magtige teentowerkrag. Ek sien dit nou – daar is na alles niks besonders aan jou nie. Ek het gewonder, weet jy. Want daar is 'n vreemde ooreenkoms tussen ons, Harry Potter. Selfs jy moet dit opgelet het. Albei van ons is halfbloed

weeskinders wat deur Moggels grootgemaak is. Waarskynlik die enigste twee Parselmonde wat na Hogwarts gekom het sedert die groot Slibberin hier was. Ons lyk selfs na mekaar . . . Maar, ten spyte hiervan, was dit blote geluk dat jy bly leef het. Dit is al wat ek wou weet.”

Harry staan gespanne en wag dat Dhoewels sy towerstaf moet lig. Maar Dhoewels se skewe glimlag verdiep.

“Nou, Harry, gaan ek vir jou ’n klein lessie leer. Kom ons meet die magte van die Heer Woldemort, Erfgenaam van Salazar Slibberin, teen die beroemde Harry Potter en die beste wapens wat Dompeldorius vir hom kan gee.”

Hy kyk geamuseerd na Fawkes en die Sorteelhoed voor hy wegstap. Harry voel hoe die vrees teen sy lam bene opkruip, terwyl hy kyk hoe Dhoewels tussen die hoë pilare gaan staan en opkyk na Slibberin se klipgesig, daar hoog bō hom in die skemer. Dhoewels maak sy mond wyd oop en sis – maar Harry verstaan wat hy sê.

“Praat met my Slibberin, grootste van die Hogwarts Vier.”

Harry draai op sy hak om na die standbeeld te kyk en Fawkes swaai liggies op sy skouer.

Slibberin se reusagtige klipgesig beweeg. Vervul met walging sien Harry hoe sy mond wyer en wyer oopgaan, tot daar ’n groot swart gat is.

Binne-in die standbeeld se mond roer iets. Iets wat uit die donker dieptes opseil.

Harry tree agteruit tot hy teen die Kamer se donker muur staan, en toe hy sy oë toemaak, voel hy Fawkes se vlerk teen sy wang soos hy die lug in skiet. Harry wil skree, “Moet my nie alleen los nie!” maar watter kans het ’n feniks tog teen die koning van alle slange?

Iets groots tref die kamer se klipvloer en Harry voel hoe dit bewe. Hy weet wat besig is om te gebeur, hy kan dit aanvoel, hy kan amper sien hoe die reuseslang uit Slibberin se mond kronkel. Toe hoor hy Dhoewels se sissende stem: *“Maak hom dood.”*

Die Basilisk beweeg in Harry se rigting. Hy hoor hoe die swaar liggaam tydsam oor die stowwerige vloer seil. Met sy oë styf toe hardloop Harry blindelings sywaarts, sy hande uitgestrek voor hom om sy pad te voel. En Dhoewels lag . . .

Harry struikel. Hy val hard op die klip en proe bloed. Die slang is slegs enkele treë van hom af, hy kan dit hoor kom.

Toe kom ’n luide, sissende plofgeluid van reg bo hom af, en iets swaars tref Harry so hard dat hy teen die muur gesmeer word. Terwyl hy wag dat die tande deur sy liggaam sink, hoor hy nog meer sissgeluide en iets wat wild teen die pilare slaan.

Hy kan nie anders nie. Hy maak sy oë oop, net wyd genoeg sodat hy skeefweg kan loer na wat aangaan.

Die reuseslang, ’n helder giftige groen en so dik soos ’n eikeboom se

stam, se lyf staan hoog in die lug en sy groot, plat kop swaai dronkerig tussen die pilare. Harry bly bewend staan, gereed om sy oë toe te maak as die slang sou draai, toe hy sien wat dit is wat die slang besig hou.

Fawkes vlieg om sy kop en die Basilisk kap verwoed na hom met slag-tande wat so lank en dun soos sabels is.

Fawkes duik. Sy lang, goue snawel sink weg en 'n skielike straal donker bloed spuit oor die grond. Die slang slaan met sy stert, mis Harry net-net en voor Harry sy oë kan toemaak, draai dit om. Harry kyk vol in sy gesig en sien dat sy oë, albei sy groot geel uitpeuloë, deur die feniks geprik is; bloed stroom vloer toe en die slang spoeg van pyn.

"Nee!" hoor Harry vir Dhoewels skree. *"Los die voël! Los die voël! Die seun is agter jou! Jy kan hom nog ruik! Maak hom dood!"*

Die verblinde slang swaai, verward, maar steeds dodelik. Fawkes sirkel om sy kop, hy sing sy vreemde lied en kap dan hier, dan daar na die Basilisk se skubberige kop, terwyl die bloed uit die slang se oë stroom.

"Help my, help my," mompel Harry wildweg, *"iemand, enigiemand!"*

Weer slaan die slang met sy stert oor die vloer. Harry koes. Iets sags tref hom vol in die gesig.

Die Basilisk het die Sorteelhoed in Harry se arms geslaan. Harry gryp dit. Dit is al wat hy het, sy enigste kans. Hy plak dit op sy kop en gooi homself plat op die vloer net toe die Basilisk se stert weer eens oor hom swaai.

"Help my . . . help my . . ." dink Harry, sy oë styf toe onder die hoed. *"Asseblief, help my!"*

Daar is geen stem wat antwoord nie. Pleks daarvan trek die hoed saam om sy kop asof 'n onsigbare hand dit styf vasdruk.

Iets baie hards en swaars val op Harry se kop sodat hy sterre sien. Hy gryp die hoed se bol om dit af te pluk en voel iets wat lank en hard is daaronder.

'n Glimmende silwer swaard het binne-in die hoed verskyn. Die handvatsel is ingelê met glinsterende robyne so groot soos eiers.

"Maak die seun dood! Los die voël! Die seun is agter jou! Ruik – ruik hom uit!"

Harry is op sy voete en gereed vir aksie. Die Basilisk se kop sak, sy liggaam kronkel en slaan teen die pilare soos dit rondkrul en na hom soek. Harry sien die groot, bloederige oogholtes, die bek wat wyd oopgaan, wyd genoeg om hom heel in te sluk, en vol slag-tande so lank soos sy swaard, dun, glinsterend, giftig . . .

Die slang pik blindweg. Harry koes weg en dit tref 'n muur. Weer slaan dit toe; die gevurkte tong raak Harry se sy. Hy lig die swaard in albei sy hande.

Weer slaan die Basilisk toe; hierdie keer mik hy reg. Harry gooi sy volle gewig agter die swaard en dryf dit tot aan die hef in die slang se verhemelte in.

Saam met die warm bloed wat oor Harry se arms stroom, voel hy 'n siedende pyn net bo sy elmboog. Een lang giftand sink dieper en dieper in sy arm weg en breek af toe die Basilisk sywaarts kantel en stuiptrek-kend op die vloer neerslaan.

Harry gly af teen die muur. Hy gryp die tand wat nog steeds gif in sy liggaam pomp en ruk dit uit sy arm. Maar hy weet dit is te laat. Witwarm pyn sprei vanaf die wond deur sy liggaam. Toe die tand uit sy vingers glip en hy sien hoe sy bloed oor sy kleed stroom, word sy oë mistig. Die kamer vervaag in 'n warreling van dowwe kleure.

'n Rooi vlek swiep verby hom en Harry hoor die geklater van kloue op die vloer langs hom.

“Fawkes,” mompel Harry deur dik lippe. “Dit was briljant, Fawkes . . .” Hy voel hoe die voël sy manjifieke kop laat rus op die plek waar die slang hom gepik het.

Hy hoor voetstappe en toe val 'n donker skaduwee oor hom.

“Jy is dood, Harry Potter,” kom Dhoewels se stem van bo af. “Dood. Selfs Dompeldorius se voël weet dit. Kan jy nie sien wat hy doen nie, Potter? Hy huil.”

Harry knipper sy oë. Fawkes se kop beweeg in en uit fokus. Dik pêrelagtige trane drup oor sy glansende vere.

“Ek gaan net hier sit en kyk hoe jy doodgaan, Harry Potter. Vat jou tyd. Ek is nie haastig nie.”

Harry voel slaperig. Dis of alles om hom in die rondte tol.

“Dis dan die einde van die beroemde Harry Potter,” sê Dhoewels se stem van ver af. “Alleen in die Kamer van Geheimenisse, versaaak deur sy vriende, verslaan deur die Donker Heer wat hy so dom was om uit te daag. Binnekort is jy by jou kosbare Modderbloedma, Harry . . . sy het vir jou twaalf geleende jare gekoop . . . maar heer Woldemort het jou wel gekry, soos jy moes geweet het.”

As dit doodgaan is, dink Harry, is dit glad nie so sleg nie. Selfs die pyn is besig om weg te gaan . . .

Maar is dit doodgaan? Pleks van donker te word, is dit of die Kamer terug in fokus kom. Harry skud sy kop so effens en daar is Fawkes, nog steeds met sy kop op Harry se arm. 'n Pêrelagtige kors van trane blink om die wond – behalwe dat daar *geen* wond is nie.

“Skoert, voël,” sê Dhoewels skielik. “Gee pad van hom af, ek sê *schoert!*”

Harry lig sy kop. Dhoewels rig Harry se towerstaf op Fawkes; daar is 'n knal soos 'n geweer en Fawkes vlieg weg in 'n warreling van goud en skarlaken.

“Fenikstrane . . .” sê Dhoewels terwyl hy na Harry se arm staar. “Natuurlik . . . helende magte . . . ek het vergeet . . .”

Hy kyk in Harry se gesig. “Nie dat dit saak maak nie. Om die waarheid te sê, ek verkies dit so. Net ek en jy, Harry Potter . . . ek en jy . . .”

Hy lig die towerstaf.

Maar in 'n warreling van vlerke is Fawkes terug en iets val in Harry se skoot – *die dagboek*.

Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde staan sowel Harry as Dhoewels daarna. Dhoewels hou die towerstaf nog steeds hoog bo sy kop. Toe, sonder dat hy daaroor dink, asof hy dit nog die hele tyd wou doen, raap Harry die Basilisk se tand van die vloer af op en druk dit met een felle slag dwarsdeur die boek se hart.

'n Aaklige, lang, uitgerekte kreet volg. Ink spuit in strale uit die dagboek en stroom oor Harry se hande en oor die vloer. Dhoewels spartel en skop, hy skreeu en slaan met sy arms en toe . . .

Hy is weg. Harry se towerstaf val kletterend op die vloer. Toe is dit stil, behalwe die gedrup-drup van ink wat nog steeds uit die dagboek sypel. Die Basilisk se gif het 'n sissende gat dwarsdeur die boek gebrand.

Harry bewe van kop tot tone. Sy kop draai asof hy kilometers ver met Floopoeier gereis het. Stadig vat hy sy towerstaf en die Sorteelhoed bymekaar en toe, met 'n harde pluk, ruk hy die glinsterende swaard uit die Basilisk se mond.

In die hoek van die Kamer hoor hy iemand saggies kreun. Dis Ginny wat roer. Toe Harry hom na haar haas, sit sy regop. Haar verwilderde oë dwaal van die enorme vorm van die dooie Basilisk na Harry in sy bloedbevlekte kleed, en toe na die dagboek in sy hand. Sy trek haar asem sidderend in en toe stroom die tranes oor haar wange.

“Harry – o, Harry – ek het probeer om te sê daardie dag by ontbyt, maar ek *k-kon* net nie voor Percy daarvan praat nie. Dit was *ek*, Harry – maar ek – ek s-sweer ek het nie b-bedoel om – Dhoewels het my gedwing, hy't my oorgeneem – en – *hoe* het jy daardie ding doodgemaak? W-waar is Dhoewels? Die laaste ding wat ek kan onthou, is toe hy uit daardie dagboek kom –”

“Alles is reg,” sê Harry. Hy hou die dagboek op en wys vir haar die gat wat die slagtang gemaak het. “Dhoewels is dood. Kyk! Hy *en* die Basilisk. Komaan, Ginny, kom ons gee pad –”

“Ek gaan geskors word!” huil Ginny terwyl Harry haar lompweg op-help. “Ek het so daarna uitgesien om Hogwarts toe te kom, al van B-Bill hier was en n-nou sal ek moet teruggaan en – *w-wat gaan my ma en pa sê?*”

Fawkes wag vir hulle. Hy sweefhang in die ingang na die Kamer. Harry jaag vir Ginny aan; hulle tree oor die beweginglose kronkels van die dooie Basilisk, deur die weergalmende somberheid en terug in die tunnel. Harry hoor hoe die klipdeure met 'n sagte gesis agter hulle sluit.

Na 'n paar minute hoor Harry, voor in die donker tunnel, die veraf geluid van rotse wat geskuif word.

“Ron!” gil Harry en loop vinniger. “Ginny makeer niks! Ek het haar!”

Hy hoor hoe Ron gedemp juig en toe hulle om die volgende draai kom, sien hulle sy gretige gesig deur die opening wat hy in die rotsstorting gemaak het.

“Ginny!” Ron steek sy arm deur die gaping in die rotse om haar eerste deur te help. “Jy lewe! Ek kan dit nie glo nie! Wat het gebeur?”

Hy probeer haar omhels, maar ’n snikkende Ginny hou hom terug.

“Maar alles is reg, Ginny,” sê Ron stralend. “Dis oor, dis – waar kom daardie voël vandaan?”

Fawkes het na Ginny deur die opening gevlieg.

“Dis Dompeldorius s’n,” sê Harry, terwyl ook hy deur die gaping sukkel.

“En waar kry jy daardie swaard?” Ron gaap die glinsterende wapen in Harry se hande aan.

“Ek sal verduidelik wanneer ons buite is,” sê Harry met ’n sydelingse blik na Ginny.

“Maar –”

“Later,” sê Harry vinnig. Hy dink nie dis ’n goeie idee om juis nou vir Ron te vertel wie die Kamer oopgemaak het nie, in elk geval, nie voor Ginny nie. “Waar’s Lockhart?”

“Daar agter,” sê Ron grinnikend en wys met sy kop na die pyp in die tunnel. “Hy lyk maar sleg. Kom kyk.”

Hulle volg vir Fawkes, wie se breë, rooi vlerke ’n sagte goue gloed in die donkerte afgee en stap die hele ent pad terug na die mond van die pyp. Daar sit Gilderoy Lockhart rustig en neurie.

“Sy geheue is weg,” sê Ron. “Die Geheuetowerspreuk het nie die regte uitwerking gehad nie. Het vir hom, pleks van ons getref. Hy’t nie ’n idee wie hy is, waar hy is, of wie ons is nie. Ek het vir hom gesê om hier te kom wag. Hy’s ’n gevaar vir homself.”

Lockhart staar goedig na hulle.

“Hallo,” sê hy. “Snaakse soort plek, is dit nie? Woon julle hier?”

“Nee,” sê Ron en lig sy wenkbroue vir Harry.

Harry buk af en tuur op in die lang, donker pyp.

“Het jy al gewonder hoe ons weer bo gaan kom?” sê hy vir Ron.

Ron skud sy kop, maar Fawkes swiep verby Harry en fladder voor hom, sy kraalogies blink in die donkerte. Hy waai sy lang goue stertvere. Harry kyk onseker na hom.

“Ek dink hy wil hê jy moet aan hom vashou . . .” sê Ron en hy lyk verward. “Maar jy is tog heeltemal te swaar vir ’n voël om jou hier op te trek.”

“Fawkes,” sê Harry, “is nie ’n gewone voël nie.” Hy draai vinnig na die ander. “Ons moet aan mekaar vashou. Ginny, vat Ron se hand. Professor Lockhart –”

“Hy bedoel jy,” sê Ron skerp aan Lockhart.

“Hou Ginny se ander hand vas.”

Harry steek sy swaard en die Sorteelhoed in sy gordel, Ron hou aan die agterkant van Harry se kleed vas en Harry gryp Fawkes se stertvere, wat vreemd warm voel.

’n Eienaardige ligte gevoel versprei deur sy hele liggaam en die volgende oomblik vlieg hulle met ’n whoesj-geluid op in die pyp. Harry hoor hoe Lockhart, wat onder hom hang, sê, “Wonderbaarlik! Wonderbaarlik! Dis soos toordery!” Die koue lug fluit deur Harry se hare en voor hy die rit werklik kan geniet, is dit oor – al vier van hulle slaan neer op die nat vloer in Katryn Kermkous se badkamer en terwyl Lockhart sy hoed regskuif, glip die wasbak waaragter die pyp versteek is, terug in posisie.

Katryn gaap hulle met groot oë aan.

“Jy lewe,” sê sy dofweg aan Harry.

“Dis nie nodig om so teleurgesteld te klink nie,” sê hy grimmig, terwyl hy spatsels bloed en slym van sy bril afvee.

“O, wel . . . ek het juis gedink. As jy nou dood was, dan kon jy my toilet-hokkie met my gedeel het,” sê Katryn en sy bloos silwer.

“Jig!” sê Ron toe hulle by die badkamer uitstap na die donker en verlate gang daar buite. “Harry! Ek dink Katryn *hou* van jou! Jy het kompetisie, Ginny!”

Die tranes vloei nog steeds geluidloos oor Ginny se wange.

“Waarheen nou?” vra Ron met ’n benoude kyk na Ginny. Harry wys na Fawkes.

Fawkes vlieg in ’n goudkleurige gloed voor hulle uit. Hulle stap agterna en oomblikke later staan hulle voor professor McGonagall se kantoor. Harry klop en stoot die deur oop.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



DOBBY'S REWARD

For a moment there was silence as Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart stood in the doorway, covered in muck and slime and (in Harry's case) blood. Then there was a scream.

"Ginny!"

It was Mrs. Weasley, who had been sitting crying in front of the fire. She leapt to her feet, closely followed by Mr. Weasley, and both of them flung themselves on their daughter.

Harry, however, was looking past them. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the mantelpiece, beaming, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steadying gasps, clutching her chest. Fawkes went whooshing past Harry's ear and settled on Dumbledore's shoulder, just as Harry found himself and Ron being

swept into Mrs. Weasley's tight embrace.

"You saved her! You saved her! *How* did you do it?"

"I think we'd all like to know that," said Professor McGonagall weakly.

Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry, who hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the desk and laid upon it the Sorting Hat, the ruby-encrusted sword, and what remained of Riddle's diary.

Then he started telling them everything. For nearly a quarter of an hour he spoke into the rapt silence: He told them about hearing the disembodied voice, how Hermione had finally realized that he was hearing a basilisk in the pipes; how he and Ron had followed the spiders into the forest, that Aragog had told them where the last victim of the basilisk had died; how he had guessed that Moaning Myrtle had been the victim, and that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets might be in her bathroom. . . .

"Very well," Professor McGonagall prompted him as he paused, "so you found out where the entrance was — breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add — but how on *earth* did you all get out of there alive, Potter?"

So Harry, his voice now growing hoarse from all this talking, told them about Fawkes's timely arrival and about the Sorting Hat giving him the sword. But then he faltered. He had so far avoided mentioning Riddle's diary — or Ginny. She was standing with her head against Mrs. Weasley's shoulder, and tears were still coursing silently down her cheeks. *What if they expelled her?* Harry thought in panic. Riddle's diary didn't work anymore. . . . How could they prove it had been *he* who'd made her do it all?

Instinctively, Harry looked at Dumbledore, who smiled faintly, the firelight glancing off his half-moon spectacles.

“What interests *me* most,” said Dumbledore gently, “is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania.”

Relief — warm, sweeping, glorious relief — swept over Harry.

“W-what’s that?” said Mr. Weasley in a stunned voice. “*You-Know-Who*? En-enchanted *Ginny*? But Ginny’s not . . . Ginny hasn’t been . . . has she?”

“It was this diary,” said Harry quickly, picking it up and showing it to Dumbledore. “Riddle wrote it when he was sixteen. . . .”

Dumbledore took the diary from Harry and peered keenly down his long, crooked nose at its burnt and soggy pages.

“Brilliant,” he said softly. “Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen.” He turned around to the Weasleys, who were looking utterly bewildered.

“Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He disappeared after leaving the school . . . traveled far and wide . . . sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consorted with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recognizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here.”

“But, Ginny,” said Mrs. Weasley. “What’s our Ginny got to do with — with — *him*?”

“His d-diary!” Ginny sobbed. “I’ve b-been writing in it, and he’s

been w-writing back all year —”

“*Ginny!*” said Mr. Weasley, flabbergasted. “Haven’t I taught you *anything*? What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself *if you can’t see where it keeps its brain*. Why didn’t you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was *clearly* full of Dark Magic —”

“I d-didn’t know,” sobbed Ginny. “I found it inside one of the books Mum got me. I th-thought someone had just left it in there and forgotten about it —”

“Miss Weasley should go up to the hospital wing right away,” Dumbledore interrupted in a firm voice. “This has been a terrible ordeal for her. There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wizards than she have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort.” He strode over to the door and opened it. “Bed rest and perhaps a large, steaming mug of hot chocolate. I always find that cheers me up,” he added, twinkling kindly down at her. “You will find that Madam Pomfrey is still awake. She’s just giving out Mandrake juice — I daresay the basilisk’s victims will be waking up any moment.”

“So Hermione’s okay!” said Ron brightly.

“There has been no lasting harm done, Ginny,” said Dumbledore.

Mrs. Weasley led Ginny out, and Mr. Weasley followed, still looking deeply shaken.

“You know, Minerva,” Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully to Professor McGonagall, “I think all this merits a good *feast*. Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?”

“Right,” said Professor McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. “I’ll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?”

“Certainly,” said Dumbledore.

She left, and Harry and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. What exactly had Professor McGonagall meant, *deal* with them? Surely — *surely* — they weren’t about to be punished?

“I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules,” said Dumbledore.

Ron opened his mouth in horror.

“Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words,” Dumbledore went on, smiling. “You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and — let me see — yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor.”

Ron went as brightly pink as Lockhart’s valentine flowers and closed his mouth again.

“But one of us seems to be keeping mightily quiet about his part in this dangerous adventure,” Dumbledore added. “Why so modest, Gilderoy?”

Harry gave a start. He had completely forgotten about Lockhart. He turned and saw that Lockhart was standing in a corner of the room, still wearing his vague smile. When Dumbledore addressed him, Lockhart looked over his shoulder to see who he was talking to.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Ron said quickly, “there was an accident down in the Chamber of Secrets. Professor Lockhart —”

“Am I a professor?” said Lockhart in mild surprise. “Goodness. I expect I was hopeless, was I?”

“He tried to do a Memory Charm and the wand backfired,” Ron explained quietly to Dumbledore.

“Dear me,” said Dumbledore, shaking his head, his long silver

mustache quivering. “Impaled upon your own sword, Gilderoy!”

“Sword?” said Lockhart dimly. “Haven’t got a sword. That boy has, though.” He pointed at Harry. “He’ll lend you one.”

“Would you mind taking Professor Lockhart up to the infirmary, too?” Dumbledore said to Ron. “I’d like a few more words with Harry. . . .”

Lockhart ambled out. Ron cast a curious look back at Dumbledore and Harry as he closed the door.

Dumbledore crossed to one of the chairs by the fire.

“Sit down, Harry,” he said, and Harry sat, feeling unaccountably nervous.

“First of all, Harry, I want to thank you,” said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling again. “You must have shown me real loyalty down in the Chamber. Nothing but that could have called Fawkes to you.”

He stroked the phoenix, which had fluttered down onto his knee. Harry grinned awkwardly as Dumbledore watched him.

“And so you met Tom Riddle,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “I imagine he was *most* interested in you. . . .”

Suddenly, something that was nagging at Harry came tumbling out of his mouth.

“Professor Dumbledore . . . Riddle said I’m like him. Strange likenesses, he said. . . .”

“*Did* he, now?” said Dumbledore, looking thoughtfully at Harry from under his thick silver eyebrows. “And what do you think, Harry?”

“I don’t think I’m like him!” said Harry, more loudly than he’d intended. “I mean, I’m — I’m in *Gryffindor*, I’m . . .”

But he fell silent, a lurking doubt resurfacing in his mind.

“Professor,” he started again after a moment. “The Sorting Hat told me I’d — I’d have done well in Slytherin. Everyone thought *I* was Slytherin’s heir for a while . . . because I can speak Parseltongue. . . .”

“You can speak Parseltongue, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly, “because Lord Voldemort — who *is* the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin — can speak Parseltongue. Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I’m sure. . . .”

“Voldemort put a bit of himself in *me*?” Harry said, thunderstruck.

“It certainly seems so.”

“So I *should* be in Slytherin,” Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore’s face. “The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin’s power in me, and it —”

“Put you in Gryffindor,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue — resourcefulness — determination — a certain disregard for rules,” he added, his mustache quivering again. “Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think.”

“It only put me in Gryffindor,” said Harry in a defeated voice, “because I asked not to go in Slytherin. . . .”

“*Exactly*,” said Dumbledore, beaming once more. “Which makes you *very different* from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” Harry sat motionless in his chair, stunned. “If you want proof, Harry, that you

belong in Gryffindor, I suggest you look more closely at *this*.”

Dumbledore reached across to Professor McGonagall’s desk, picked up the blood-stained silver sword, and handed it to Harry. Dully, Harry turned it over, the rubies blazing in the firelight. And then he saw the name engraved just below the hilt.

Godric Gryffindor.

“Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled *that* out of the hat, Harry,” said Dumbledore simply.

For a minute, neither of them spoke. Then Dumbledore pulled open one of the drawers in Professor McGonagall’s desk and took out a quill and a bottle of ink.

“What you need, Harry, is some food and sleep. I suggest you go down to the feast, while I write to Azkaban — we need our gamekeeper back. And I must draft an advertisement for the *Daily Prophet*, too,” he added thoughtfully. “We’ll be needing a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. . . . Dear me, we do seem to run through them, don’t we?”

Harry got up and crossed to the door. He had just reached for the handle, however, when the door burst open so violently that it bounced back off the wall.

Lucius Malfoy stood there, fury in his face. And cowering behind his legs, heavily wrapped in bandages, was *Dobby*.

“Good evening, Lucius,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

Mr. Malfoy almost knocked Harry over as he swept into the room. Dobby went scurrying in after him, crouching at the hem of his cloak, a look of abject terror on his face.

The elf was carrying a stained rag with which he was attempting to

finish cleaning Mr. Malfoy's shoes. Apparently Mr. Malfoy had set out in a great hurry, for not only were his shoes half-polished, but his usually sleek hair was disheveled. Ignoring the elf bobbing apologetically around his ankles, he fixed his cold eyes upon Dumbledore.

"So!" he said "You've come back. The governors suspended you, but you still saw fit to return to Hogwarts."

"Well, you see, Lucius," said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, "the other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They'd heard that Arthur Weasley's daughter had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too. . . . Several of them seemed to think that you had threatened to curse their families if they didn't agree to suspend me in the first place."

Mr. Malfoy went even paler than usual, but his eyes were still slits of fury.

"So — have you stopped the attacks yet?" he sneered. "Have you caught the culprit?"

"We have," said Dumbledore, with a smile.

"*Well?*" said Mr. Malfoy sharply. "Who is it?"

"The same person as last time, Lucius," said Dumbledore. "But this time, Lord Voldemort was acting through somebody else. By means of this diary."

He held up the small black book with the large hole through the center, watching Mr. Malfoy closely. Harry, however, was watching Dobby.

The elf was doing something very odd. His great eyes fixed meaningfully on Harry, he kept pointing at the diary, then at Mr. Malfoy, and then hitting himself hard on the head with his fist.

“I see . . .” said Mr. Malfoy slowly to Dumbledore.

“A clever plan,” said Dumbledore in a level voice, still staring Mr. Malfoy straight in the eye. “Because if Harry here” — Mr. Malfoy shot Harry a swift, sharp look — “and his friend Ron hadn’t discovered this book, why — Ginny Weasley might have taken all the blame. No one would ever have been able to prove she hadn’t acted of her own free will. . . .”

Mr. Malfoy said nothing. His face was suddenly masklike.

“And imagine,” Dumbledore went on, “what might have happened then. . . . The Weasleys are one of our most prominent pure-blood families. Imagine the effect on Arthur Weasley and his Muggle Protection Act, if his own daughter was discovered attacking and killing Muggle-borns. . . . Very fortunate the diary was discovered, and Riddle’s memories wiped from it. Who knows what the consequences might have been otherwise. . . .”

Mr. Malfoy forced himself to speak.

“Very fortunate,” he said stiffly.

And still, behind his back, Dobby was pointing, first to the diary, then to Lucius Malfoy, then punching himself in the head.

And Harry suddenly understood. He nodded at Dobby, and Dobby backed into a corner, now twisting his ears in punishment.

“Don’t you want to know how Ginny got hold of that diary, Mr. Malfoy?” said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy rounded on him.

“How should I know how the stupid little girl got hold of it?” he said.

“Because you gave it to her,” said Harry. “In Flourish and Blotts. You picked up her old Transfiguration book and slipped the diary inside it, didn’t you?”

He saw Mr. Malfoy’s white hands clench and unclench.

“Prove it,” he hissed.

“Oh, no one will be able to do that,” said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry. “Not now that Riddle has vanished from the book. On the other hand, I would advise you, Lucius, not to go giving out any more of Lord Voldemort’s old school things. If any more of them find their way into innocent hands, I think Arthur Weasley, for one, will make sure they are traced back to you. . . .”

Lucius Malfoy stood for a moment, and Harry distinctly saw his right hand twitch as though he was longing to reach for his wand. Instead, he turned to his house-elf.

“We’re going, Dobby!”

He wrenched open the door and as the elf came hurrying up to him, he kicked him right through it. They could hear Dobby squealing with pain all the way along the corridor. Harry stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then it came to him —

“Professor Dumbledore,” he said hurriedly. “Can I give that diary *back* to Mr. Malfoy, please?”

“Certainly, Harry,” said Dumbledore calmly. “But hurry. The feast, remember. . . .”

Harry grabbed the diary and dashed out of the office. He could hear Dobby’s squeals of pain receding around the corner. Quickly,

wondering if this plan could possibly work, Harry took off one of his shoes, pulled off his slimy, filthy sock, and stuffed the diary into it. Then he ran down the dark corridor.

He caught up with them at the top of the stairs.

“Mr. Malfoy,” he gasped, skidding to a halt, “I’ve got something for you —”

And he forced the smelly sock into Lucius Malfoy’s hand.

“What the — ?”

Mr. Malfoy ripped the sock off the diary, threw it aside, then looked furiously from the ruined book to Harry.

“You’ll meet the same sticky end as your parents one of these days, Harry Potter,” he said softly. “They were meddlesome fools, too.”

He turned to go.

“Come, Dobby. I said, *come*.”

But Dobby didn’t move. He was holding up Harry’s disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure.

“Master has given a sock,” said the elf in wonderment. “Master gave it to Dobby.”

“What’s that?” spat Mr. Malfoy. “What did you say?”

“Got a sock,” said Dobby in disbelief. “Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby — Dobby is *free*.”

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry.

“You’ve lost me my servant, boy!”

But Dobby shouted, “You shall not harm Harry Potter!”

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backward. He

crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing below. He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long, threatening finger.

“You shall go now,” he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Malfoy. “You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now.”

Lucius Malfoy had no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight.

“Harry Potter freed Dobby!” said the elf shrilly, gazing up at Harry, moonlight from the nearest window reflected in his orb-like eyes. “Harry Potter set Dobby free!”

“Least I could do, Dobby,” said Harry, grinning. “Just promise never to try and save my life again.”

The elf’s ugly brown face split suddenly into a wide, toothy smile.

“I’ve just got one question, Dobby,” said Harry as Dobby pulled on Harry’s sock with shaking hands. “You told me all this had nothing to do with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, remember? Well —”

“It was a clue, sir,” said Dobby, his eyes widening, as though this was obvious. “Was giving you a clue. The Dark Lord, before he changed his name, could be freely named, you see?”

“Right,” said Harry weakly. “Well, I’d better go. There’s a feast, and my friend Hermione should be awake by now. . . .”

Dobby threw his arms around Harry’s middle and hugged him.

“Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!” he sobbed. “Farewell, Harry Potter!”

And with a final loud crack, Dobby disappeared.

Harry had been to several Hogwarts feasts, but never one quite like

this. Everybody was in their pajamas, and the celebration lasted all night. Harry didn't know whether the best bit was Hermione running toward him, screaming "You solved it! You solved it!" or Justin hurrying over from the Hufflepuff table to wring his hand and apologize endlessly for suspecting him, or Hagrid turning up at half past three, cuffing Harry and Ron so hard on the shoulders that they were knocked into their plates of trifle, or his and Ron's four hundred points for Gryffindor securing the House Cup for the second year running, or Professor McGonagall standing up to tell them all that the exams had been canceled as a school treat ("Oh, *no!*" said Hermione), or Dumbledore announcing that, unfortunately, Professor Lockhart would be unable to return next year, owing to the fact that he needed to go away and get his memory back. Quite a few of the teachers joined in the cheering that greeted this news.

"Shame," said Ron, helping himself to a jam doughnut. "He was starting to grow on me."

The rest of the final term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal with only a few, small differences. Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were canceled ("but we've had plenty of practice at that anyway," Ron told a disgruntled Hermione) and Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school governor. Draco was no longer strutting around the school as though he owned the place. On the contrary, he looked resentful and sulky. On the other hand, Ginny Weasley was perfectly happy again.

Too soon, it was time for the journey home on the Hogwarts Express. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny got a compartment to themselves. They made the most of the last few hours

in which they were allowed to do magic before the holidays. They played Exploding Snap, set off the very last of Fred and George's Filibuster fireworks, and practiced Disarming each other by magic. Harry was getting very good at it.

They were almost at King's Cross when Harry remembered something.

"Ginny — what did you see Percy doing, that he didn't want you to tell anyone?"

"Oh, that," said Ginny, giggling. "Well — Percy's got a *girlfriend*."

Fred dropped a stack of books on George's head.

"*What?*"

"It's that Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater," said Ginny. "That's who he was writing to all last summer. He's been meeting her all over the school in secret. I walked in on them *kissing* in an empty classroom one day. He was so upset when she was — you know — attacked. You won't tease him, will you?" she added anxiously.

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Fred, who was looking like his birthday had come early.

"Definitely not," said George, sniggering.

The Hogwarts Express slowed and finally stopped.

Harry pulled out his quill and a bit of parchment and turned to Ron and Hermione.

"This is called a telephone number," he told Ron, scribbling it twice, tearing the parchment in two, and handing it to them. "I told your dad how to use a telephone last summer — he'll know. Call me at the Dursleys', okay? I can't stand another two months with only

Dudley to talk to. . . .”

“Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won’t they?” said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. “When they hear what you did this year?”

“Proud?” said Harry. “Are you crazy? All those times I could’ve died, and I didn’t manage it? They’ll be furious. . . .”

And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world.

Dobbi se Beloning

Vir 'n oomblik is dit doodstil terwyl Harry, Ron, Ginny en Lockhart in die deur staan, vol modder en slym en (in Harry se geval) bloed. Toe volg 'n kreet.

“Ginny!”

Dit is mev. Weasley wat voor die kaggel sit en huil het. Sy spring op, gevolg deur mnr. Weasley, en albei van hulle gooi hul arms om hul dogter.

Harry kyk verby hulle. Professor Dompeldorius staan stralend voor die kaggelrak, langs professor McGonagall wat met haar hand op haar hart haar asem snakkend intrek in 'n poging om haarself te kalmeer. Fawkes swiep verby Harry se oor en gaan sit op Dompeldorius se skouer net toe Harry voel hoe hy en Ron styf in mev. Weasley se arms toegevou word.

“Julle het haar gered! Julle het haar gered! Hoe het julle dit *gedoen*?”

“Ek dink dis wat ons almal wil weet,” sê professor McGonagall floutjies.

Mev. Weasley laat Harry los. Vir 'n oomblik aarsel hy, toe stap hy na die lessenaar en sit die Sorteelhoed, die robynversierde swaard en wat oor is van Dhoewels se dagboek daarop neer.

Daarna begin hy vertel. Vir meer as 'n kwartier praat hy terwyl 'n doodse stilte heers: hy vertel hoe hy die liggaamlose stem gehoor het, hoe Hermien uiteindelik besef het dat hy 'n Basilisk in die pype hoor; hoe hy en Ron die spinnekoppe die woud in gevolg het; dat Aragog vir hulle vertel het waar die laaste slagoffer van die Basilisk dood is; hoe hy geraai het dat Katelyn Kermkous die slagoffer was en dat die ingang tot die Kamer van Geheimenisse dalk in haar badkamer is . . .

“Wel, wel,” sê professor McGonagall toe hy vir 'n oomblik ophou praat “jy het dus uitgevind waar die ingang is – en in die proses omtrent 'n honderd skoolreëls op flagrante wyse oortree, moet ek byvoeg – maar hoe op *aarde* het julle almal lewend daar uitgekóm, Potter?”

Harry, wie se stem al hees word van al die gepraat, vertel vir hulle van Fawkes se tydige koms en hoe die Sorteelhoed vir hom die swaard gegee het. Toe aarsel hy. Tot dusver het hy nog niks oor Dhoewels se dagboek

gesê nie – of oor Ginny nie. Sy staan met haar kop teen mev. Weasley se skouer en die trane loop nog steeds oor haar wange. Sê nou hulle skors haar? dink Harry benoud. Dhoewels se dagboek werk nie meer nie . . . hoe kan hulle bewys dat dit *hy* was wat haar al hierdie dinge teen haar sin laat doen het?

Amper instinktief kyk Harry na Dompeldorius, wat fyntjies glimlag, terwyl die lig van die vuur in sy halfmaanbrilglase weerkaats.

“Wat *my* die meeste interesseer,” sê Dompeldorius stadig, “is hoe heer Woldemort daarin geslaag het om vir Ginny te betower, terwyl hy, volgens my bronne, tans in die woude in Albanië wegkruip.”

Verligting – warm, ekstatiесе, wonderlike verligting – spoel oor Harry.

“W-wat sê jy daar?” sê mnr. Weasley in ’n verwilderde stem. “Jy-Weet-Wie? V-vir Ginny *b-betower*? Maar Ginny is nie . . . Ginny het nie . . . of het sy?”

“Dit was hierdie dagboek,” sê Harry vinnig terwyl hy dit optel en vir Dompeldorius wys. “Dhoewels het dit geskryf toe hy sestien was.”

Dompeldorius neem die dagboek by Harry en tuur langs sy lang, krom neus na die gebrande en deurweekte blaaie.

“Briljant,” sê hy sag. “Natuurlik, hy was waarskynlik die briljantste student wat Hogwarts nog ooit gehad het.” Hy draai na die Weasleys, wat heeltemal verwilderd lyk.

“Baie min mense weet dat heer Woldemort vroeër Erik Dhoewels genoem is. Ek het self vir hom klas gegee, vyftig jaar gelede, hier by Hogwarts. Hy het verdwyn na hy die skool verlaat het . . . ver en wyd gereis . . . diep betrokke geraak by die Donker Kunste, geheul met die swakstes van ons soort, soveel gevaarlike towertransformasies ondergaan dat toe hy weer as heer Woldemort verskyn, hy skaars herkenbaar was. Feitlik niemand het Woldemort verbind met die slim, aantreklike seun wat op sy dag hoofseun by Hogwarts was nie.”

“Maar Ginny,” sê mev. Weasley, “wat het ons Ginny met – met – *hom* te doen?”

“Sy d-dagboek,” sê Ginny snikkend. “Ek het daarin geskryf en hy’t die hele jaar lank teruggeskryf –”

“Ginny!” sê mnr. Weasley verbyster. “Het ek dan *niks* vir jou geleer nie? Wat sê ek nog altyd vir julle? Moet nooit iets vertrou wat kan dink, *as jy nie kan sien waar sy brein is nie*. Hoekom het jy nie die dagboek vir my gewys nie, of vir jou ma? Iets geheimsinnigs soos *dit*? Dit *moet* mos swart towerkuns wees!”

“Ek-ek het nie geweet nie,” snik Ginny. “Dit was binne-in een van die boeke wat Ma vir my gekoop het. Ek het ge-d-dink iemand het dit daarin gelos en daarvan vergeet . . .”

“Mej. Weasley behoort dadelik na die siekeboeg te gaan,” val Dompeldorius haar beslis in die rede. “Dit was ’n vreeslike ervaring vir haar.

Sy sal nie gestraf word nie. Ouer en wyser towenaars as sy is al deur heer Woldemort bedrieg.” Hy stap na die deur en maak dit oop. “Bedrus, en miskien ’n lekker stomende beker warm kakao. Dit laat my altyd beter voel,” voeg hy by terwyl hy met ’n vriendelike vonkel in sy oë na haar kyk. “Jy sal sien dat Madame Pomfrey nog steeds wakker is. Sy’s besig om die alruindrunkie uit te deel – die Basilisk se slagoffers behoort enige oomblik wakker te word.”

“Hermien gaan dus regkom!” sê Ron verlig.

“Daar is geen blywende skade nie,” sê Dompeldorius.

Mev. Weasley lei vir Ginny uit en mnr. Weasley stap agterna. Hy lyk nog steeds baie ontsteld.

“Jy weet, Minerva,” sê professor Dompeldorius peinsend aan professor McGonagall, “ek dink ons verdien ’n goeie fees. Mag ek vra dat jy dit met die kombuis sal gaan reël?”

“Goed,” sê professor McGonagall opgewek, terwyl ook sy deur toe stap. “Dan laat ek vir Potter en Weasley in u hande, of hoe?”

“Sekerlik,” sê Dompeldorius.

Sy stap uit en Harry en Ron staar onseker na Dompeldorius. Presies wat bedoel professor McGonagall met in u hande laat? Hulle gaan darem seker nie gestraf word nie?

“Ek verbeel my ek het gesê dat ek julle twee sal moet skors as julle verdere skoolreëls oortree,” sê Dompeldorius.

Ron se mond gaan oop van skok en afgryse.

“Dit bewys dat die beste onder ons soms ons woorde moet sluk,” gaan Dompeldorius glimlaggend voort. “Julle twee sal elk ’n Spesiale Toekenning vir Dienste gelewer aan die Skool ontvang en – laat ek sien – ja, ek dink tweehonderd punte elk vir Griffindor.”

Ron word so pienk soos Lockhart se Valentynsblomme en sy mond gaan weer toe.

“Een van ons is egter besonder stil oor sy aandeel in hierdie gevaarlike avontuur,” voeg Dompeldorius by. “Hoekom so beskeie, Gilderoy?”

Harry ruk. Hy het skoon van Lockhart vergeet. Hy draai om en sien dat Lockhart in ’n hoek van die vertrek staan, nog steeds met dieselfde dromerige glimlag. Toe Dompeldorius met hom praat, kyk Lockhart oor sy skouer om te sien met wie hy praat.

“Professor Dompeldorius,” sê Ron gou, “daar was ’n ongeluk onder in die Kamer van Geheimenisse. Professor Lockhart –”

“Is ek ’n professor?” sê Lockhart, ligweg verbaas. “Goeiste. Ek het seker maar min beteken, of hoe?”

“Hy het probeer om ’n Geheuetowerspreuk te doen en die towerstaf het teruggeskop,” verduidelik Ron onderlangs vir Dompeldorius.

“Liewe land,” sê Dompeldorius en hy skud sy kop sodat sy lang silwer moestas bewe. “Op jou eie swaard geval, Lockhart?”

“Swaard?” sê Lockhart vaag. “Het nie ’n swaard nie. Daardie seun het een.” Hy wys na Harry. “Hy sal dit vir jou leen.”

“Sal jy omgee om professor Lockhart ook na die siekeboeg te neem?” sê Dompeldorius vir Ron. “Daar’s ’n paar dingetjies wat ek vir Harry wil sê . . .”

Lockhart drentel uit. Ron kyk nuuskierig terug na Dompeldorius en Harry toe hy die deur agter hom toetrek.

Dompeldorius stap na een van die stoele by die vuur.

“Kom sit, Harry,” sê hy en Harry voel onverklaarbaar senuagtig toe hy gaan sit.

“In die eerste plek wil ek dankie sê, Harry,” begin Dompeldorius en weer blink sy oë vriendelik. “Jy moet baie lojaal teenoor my gewees het daar in die Kamer. Vir geen ander rede sal Fawkes iemand help nie.”

Hy streel oor die feniks wat tot op sy knie gevlieg het. Harry grinnik verleë terwyl Dompeldorius hom dophou.

“So, jy het toe vir Erik Dhoewels ontmoet,” sê Dompeldorius ingedagte. “Ek veronderstel hy het *baie* in jou belang gestel . . .”

Skielik tuimel iets wat Harry nog die hele tyd pla, sommer uit sy mond.

“Professor Dompeldorius . . . Dhoewels het gesê ek is soos hy. Interessante ooreenkoms, het hy gesê . . .”

“Het hy?” sê Dompeldorius en staar peinsend van onder sy swaar silwer wenkbroue na Harry. “En wat dink jy daarvan, Harry?”

“Ek dink nie ek is soos hy nie!” sê Harry harder as wat hy wou. “Ek bedoel, ek – ek is in *Griffindor*, ek’s . . .”

Hy bly stil. Nou twyfel hy weer van voor af.

“Professor,” begin hy weer na ’n rukkie, “die Sorteelhoed het vir my gesê dat ek – dat ek goed sal doen in Slibberin. Almal het vir ’n ruk gedink ek is Slibberin se erfgenaam . . . omdat ek Parseltaal kan praat . . .”

“Jy kan Parseltaal praat, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard, “omdat heer Woldemort – die laaste oorlewende nasaat van Salazar Slibberin – Parseltaal kan praat. Tensy ek ’n groot fout maak, het hy daardie nag toe hy vir jou die litteken gegee het, van sy magte op jou oorgedra. Nie iets wat hy doelbewus wou doen nie, daarvan is ek seker . . .”

“Woldemort het iets van hom in my gesit?” sê Harry oorbluf.

“Dit wil so lyk.”

“So dan *hoort* ek in Slibberin,” sê Harry en staar wanhopig in Dompeldorius se gesig. “Die Sorteelhoed kon Slibberin se mag in my sien en dit –”

“Het jou in *Griffindor* gesit,” sê Dompeldorius rustig. “Luister hier, Harry. Jy het heelwat eienskappe wat Salazar Slibberin in sy sterstudente gesoek het. Sy eie besondere gawe, Parseltaal . . . vindingrykheid . . . vasberadenheid . . . ’n sekere minagting vir reëls,” voeg hy by terwyl sy

moestas opnuut bewe. “Tog het die Sorteelhoed jou in Griffindor gesit. Jy weet hoekom. Dink.”

“Dit het my net in Griffindor gesit,” sê Harry verslae, “omdat ek gesê het ek wil nie in Slibberin wees nie . . .”

“Presies,” sê Dompeldorius en sy gesig straal weer eens. “Dit maak jou anders as Erik Dhoewels. Dit is ons keuses, Harry, wat wys wie en wat ons werklik is, baie meer as ons eienskappe.” Harry sit roerloos in die stoel, heel verstom. “As jy bewyse wil hê dat jy in Griffindor hoort, Harry, stel ek voor dat jy goed *hierna* kyk.”

Dompeldorius leun oor professor McGonagall se lessenaar en tel die bloedbevlekte, silwer swaard op en gee dit vir Harry. Harry draai dit traag om; die robyne skitter in die lig van die vuur. Toe sien hy die naam wat net onder die hef gegraveer is.

Godric Griffindor.

“Net ’n ware Griffindor sou dit uit die hoed kon haal, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius.

Vir ’n paar minute praat niemand nie. Toe trek Dompeldorius een van die laaie in professor McGonagall se lessenaar oop en haal ’n veerpen en ’n bottel ink uit.

“Wat jy nodig het, Harry, is iets te ete en ’n goeie nagrus. Ek stel voor dat jy na die fees gaan, terwyl ek aan Azkaban skryf – ons het ons boswagter nodig. Ek moet ook ’n advertensie in die *Daaglikse Profeet* plaas,” voeg hy peinsend by. “Ons moet ’n nuwe onderwyser kry vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste. Liewe land, ons maak regtig korte mette hulle, nie waar nie?”

Harry staan op en stap na die deur. Hy het net sy hand na die knop uitgesteek toe die deur met soveel geweld oopbars dat dit van die muur af terugbons.

Lucius Malfoy staan daar en hy lyk woedend. Agter hom, styf toegewikkel in verbande, staan *Dobbi*, heeltemal ineengedoke.

“Goeienaand, Lucius,” groet Dompeldorius vriendelik.

Mnr. Malfoy loop Harry amper uit die grond toe hy die vertrek binneswiep. *Dobbi* skarrel agterna en hurk aan die soom van sy kleed, ’n uitdrukking van uiterste vrees op sy gesig.

“So!” sê Lucius Malfoy, terwyl hy sy koue oë op Dompeldorius rig. “Jy is terug. Die bestuursraad het jou dienste opgeskort, maar jy reken dis jou reg om na Hogwarts toe terug te kom.”

“Wel, jy sien, Lucius,” sê Dompeldorius en hy glimlag bedaard, “die ander elf bestuurslede het my vandag gekontak. Dit het nogal gevoel of ek in ’n haelstorm van uile gevang is, om nou eerlik te wees. Hulle het gehoor dat Arthur Weasley se dogter vermoor is en het gevra dat ek dadelik terugkom. Dit lyk my hulle dink tog ek is uitgeknipt vir die werk. Baie vreemde verhale ook wat hulle vertel het. Dit lyk of verskeie van hulle

reken dat jy gedreig het om hul families te vervloek indien hulle nie instem om my te skors nie.”

Mnr. Malfoy word nog bleker as gewoonlik, maar sy oë is steeds op skrefies van woede.

“So – het jy toe die aanvalle tot ’n einde gebring?” vra hy smalend. “Het julle toe die skuldige gevang?”

“Ons het,” sê Dompeldorius met ’n glimlag.

“Wel?” sê mnr. Malfoy snydend. “Wie is dit?”

“Dieselfde persoon as laas keer, Lucius,” sê Dompeldorius. “Maar hierdie keer het heer Woldemort deur iemand anders gewerk. Met behulp van hierdie dagboek.”

Hy hou die klein swart boekie met die swart gat in die middel in die lug terwyl hy mnr. Malfoy fyn dophou. Harry hou vir Dobbi dop.

Die elf doen iets baie vreemds. Sy groot oë is betekenisvol op Harry gerig, hy wys aanhoudend na die dagboek, dan weer na mnr. Malfoy en dan slaan hy homself hard oor die kop met sy vuis.

“Ek sien . . .” sê mnr. Malfoy stadig aan Dompeldorius.

“’n Slim plan,” sê Dompeldorius gelykmatig, terwyl hy reguit in mnr. Malfoy se oë kyk. “Want as Harry hier –” mnr. Malfoy kyk vlugtig na Harry, “en sy vriend Ron nie die boek gekry het nie – dink net, dan het Ginny Weasley dalk die blaam gedra. Niemand sou kon bewys dat sy nie uit vrye wil gehandel het nie . . .”

Mnr. Malfoy antwoord nie. Sy gesig lyk soos ’n masker.

“En dink net,” gaan Dompeldorius voort, “wat sou gebeur het . . . Die Weasleys is een van ons mees gesiene volbloed families. Dink aan die uitwerking op Arthur Weasley en sy Wet op die Beskerming van Moggels, as dit moes uitkom dat sy eie dogter betrokke was by verskeie moorde op studente met Moggelouers. Wat ’n geluk dat die dagboek gevind is en dat Dhoe-wels se herinnerings uitgewis is. Wie weet wat andersins sou gebeur het . . .”

Mnr. Malfoy dwing homself om te praat.

“Baie gelukkig,” sê hy styf.

En nog eenstryk deur, daar agter sy rug, wys Dobbi eers na die dagboek, dan na Lucius Malfoy en dan slaan hy homself oor die kop.

Skielik verstaan Harry. Hy knik vir Dobbi en Dobbi gaan sit in ’n hoek en draai sy ore om homself te straf.

“Wil u nie weet waar Ginny die dagboek gekry het nie, mnr. Malfoy?” sê Harry.

Lucius Malfoy swaai om.

“Hoe moet ek tog weet hoe die klein bog dit in die hande gekry het?” vra hy.

“Want u het dit vir haar gegee,” sê Harry. “In Sierskrif en Klatt. U het haar ou Transfigurasie-boek opgetel en die dagboek skelmpies daarin gesit, nie waar nie?”

Hy sien hoe mnr. Malfoy se wit hande oop- en toegaan.

“Bewys dit,” sis hy.

“O, niemand sal dit kan doen nie,” sê Dompeldorius en glimlag vir Harry. “Nie noudat Dhoewels uit die boek verdwyn het nie. Aan die ander kant moet ek jou waarsku, Lucius, om nie nog van Woldemort se ou skoolgoed weg te gee nie. As enigiets anders in onskuldige hande moet beland, dink ek dat Arthur Weasley, om maar een naam te noem, seker sal maak dat dit na jou teruggevoer word . . .”

Lucius Malfoy staan vir ’n oomblik doodstil en Harry sien duidelik hoe sy regterhand bewe, asof hy sy towerstaf ontsettend graag wil uitruk. Pleks daarvan wend hy hom tot sy huis-elf.

“Kom ons loop, Dobbi!”

Hy wring die deur oop en toe die elf haastig nader kom, skop hy hom dwarsdeur die opening. Hulle hoor hoe Dobbi die hele ent pad in die gang af van pyn skree. Vir ’n oomblik staan Harry hard en dink. Dan kry hy ’n plan.

“Professor Dompeldorius,” sê hy vinnig, “kan ek die dagboek vir mnr. Malfoy gaan teruggee?”

“Sekerlik, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard. “Maak net gou. Die fees, onthou.”

Harry gryp die dagboek en storm uit die kantoor. Hy hoor hoe Dobbi se krete om die hoek verdwyn. Terwyl hy wonder of sy plan hoege-naamd sal werk, trek hy een van sy skoene uit, pluk die slymerige, vuil kous af en druk die dagboek daarin. Toe hardloop hy af in die donker gang.

Aan die bopunt van die trappe haal hy hulle in.

“Mnr. Malfoy,” sê hy hygend toe hy gly-gly tot stilstand kom, “ek het iets vir jou.”

Hy druk die stinkende kous in Lucius Malfoy se hand.

“Wat de – ?”

Mnr. Malfoy ruk die kous van die dagboek af en gooi dit eenkant toe. Woedend staar hy van die verrinneweerde boek na Harry.

“Jy sal nog een van die dae aan dieselfde einde as jou ouers kom, Harry Potter,” sê hy afgemete. “Hulle het ook altyd ingemeng.”

Hy draai om om te loop.

“Kom, Dobbi. Ek sê, *kom!*”

Maar Dobbi beweeg nie. Hy hou Harry se smerige kous vas en staar daarna, nes of dit ’n kosbare skat is.

“Meester het vir Dobbi ’n kous gegee,” sê die elf verwonderd. “Meester het dit vir Dobbi gegee.”

“Wat sê jy daar?” spoeg mnr. Malfoy. “Wat het jy gesê?”

“Dobbi het ’n kous,” sê Dobbi ongelowig. “Meester het dit gegooi en Dobbi het dit gevang en nou is Dobbi – nou is Dobbi vry.”

Lucius Malfoy staar asof versteen na die elf. Toe spring hy in Harry se rigting.

“Jy het my my dienskneg gekos, ellendeling!”

Maar Dobbi skreeu, “Jy sal niks aan Harry Potter doen nie!”

’n Harde knal weerklink en mnr. Malfoy word agteruit geslinger. Hy duiwel af teen die trappe, drie op ’n keer en land in ’n opgekrumpte bondel aan die onderpunt. Toe hy opstaan, sy gesig bleek van woede, en sy towerstaf uithaal, lig Dobbi ’n lang vinger dreigend.

“Jy moet loop,” sê hy kwaai en wys na mnr. Malfoy. “Jy sal nie aan Harry Potter raak nie. Jy moet loop.”

Lucius Malfoy het nie ’n keuse nie. Met ’n laaste verwoede blik na hulle, swaai hy sy mantel om hom en maak hom haastig uit die voete.

“Harry Potter het vir Dobbi bevry!” sê die elf skril, terwyl hy na Harry staar. Die maanlig wat deur die naaste venster val, word weerkaats in sy groot, ronde oë. “Harry Potter het vir Dobbi vry gemaak!”

“Die minste wat ek kon doen, Dobbi,” sê Harry met ’n skewe laggie. “Belowe net dat jy nooit weer sal probeer om my lewe te red nie.”

Die elf se lelike bruin gesig breek oop in ’n breë glimlag vol tande.

“Ek het net een vraag, Dobbi,” sê Harry toe Dobbi Harry se kous met bewende hande aantrek. “Jy het vir my gesê dat al hierdie dinge niks uit te waai het nie met Hy-Wat-Nie-Genoem-Mag-Word-Nie, onthou? Wel –”

“Dit was ’n leidraad, meneer,” sê Dobbi en sy oë rek asof dit so duidelik soos daglig moet wees. “Dobbi het vir u ’n leidraad gegee. Die Donker Heer se naam kon vryelik gebruik word, voor hy sy naam verander het, sien.”

“Reg,” sê Harry floutjies. “Wel, ek moet gaan. Daar is ’n fees en my vriendin Hermien is seker al wakker . . .”

Dobbi gooi sy arms om Harry se lyf en hou hom styf vas.

“Harry Potter is baie groter as wat Dobbi ooit kon dink!” snik hy. “Vaarwel, Harry Potter!”

En met ’n harde knalgeluid verdwyn Dobbi.

Harry was al by verskeie Hogwarts-feeste, maar nog nooit was dit soos hierdie een nie. Almal is in hul nagklere en daar word deur die nag fees gevier. Harry weet nie wat die lekkerste was nie: Hermien wat nader gehardloop het en “Jy het dit reggekry! Jy het dit reggekry!” geskree het, of Justin wat van die Hoesenproes-tafel af gekom het om sy hand te skud en oor en oor verskoning te vra dat hy hom verdink het, of toe Hagrid om halfvier opdaag en vir Harry en Ron so hard tussen die blaaie slaan dat hul gesigte binne-in hul bakke vol koekstruif beland het, of sy en Ron se vierhonderd punte vir Griffindor, sodat hulle die Huisbeker vir die tweede jaar agtereenvolgens verower het, of professor McGonagall wat opgestaan en vir almal gesê het dat die eksamens as ’n spesiale toegif ge-

kanselleer is ("O, nee!" sê Hermien), of Dompeldorius wat aangekondig het dat professor Lockhart ongelukkig nie die volgende jaar sal terugkom nie, omdat hy verlof moet neem om sy geheue terug te kry. 'n Hele paar van die onderwysers juig saam toe hierdie stukkie nuus oorgedra word.

"Haai, focitog," sê Ron toe hy 'n konfytoliebol in die hand vat. "Ek het nogals van hom begin hou."

Die res van die somerkwartaal gaan verby in 'n waas van helder sonskyn. Dinge by Hogwarts verloop weer normaal, met slegs 'n paar klein verskille: klasse in Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste is gekanselleer ("ons het in elk geval heeltemal genoeg oefening gehad," het Ron aan 'n omgekrapte Hermien gesê) en Lucius Malfoy is geskors as bestuurslid. Draco loop nie meer en pronk asof hy die skool besit nie. Inteendeel, hy lyk wrewelig en nors. Ginny Weasley, daarenteen, lyk so gelukkig as kan kom.

Te gou is dit tyd vir die reis huiswaarts op die Hogwarts Express. Harry, Ron, Hermien, Fred, George en Ginny deel 'n kompartement. In hierdie laaste paar uur wat hulle nog mag toor, doen hulle soveel toorkunsies moontlik voor die vakansie begin. Hulle speel Ontploffvreetkaart, gooi die laaste van Fred en George se Vrijbouter-klappers en oefen om mekaar deur toordery te ontwapen. Harry is besig om baie goed te raak hierin.

Hulle is amper by King's Cross toe Harry iets onthou.

"Ginny – wat het jy vir Percy sien doen wat hy nie wou hê jy moet oorvertel nie?"

"O, dit," sê Ginny en sy giggel. "Wel – Percy het 'n *meisie*."

Fred laat val 'n stapel boeke op George se kop.

"Wat?"

"Dis daardie prefek wat in Raweklou is, Penelope Clearwater," sê Ginny. "Dis die een vir wie hy laas jaar die hele somer lank geskryf het. Hy't haar oral in die skool in die geheim ontmoet. Ek het eendag op hulle afgekom waar hulle mekaar in 'n leë klaskamer soen. Hy was baie ontsteld toe sy – jy weet – aangeval is. Julle sal hom nie terg nie, sal julle?" voeg sy angstig by.

"Sal nie daarvan droom nie," sê Fred, wat lyk of dit sy verjaardag is.

"Baie beslis nie," sê George met 'n grinnik.

Die Hogwarts Express verloor spoed en kom tot stilstand.

Harry haal sy veerpen uit en 'n stukkie perkament en draai na Ron en Hermien.

"Dit is 'n telefoonnommer," sê hy vir Ron, terwyl hy dit twee keer neerskryf, die perkament middeldeer skeur en vir elkeen 'n helfte gee. "Laas somer het ek vir jou pa vertel hoe om met 'n telefoon te werk, so hy sal weet. Bel my by die Dursleys, hoor. Ek sal dit nie kan vat om vir twee maande net met Dudley te praat nie . . ."

“Jou oom en tante sal darem seker trots wees op jou, of hoe?” sê Hermien toe hulle van die trein afklim en saam met die res van die mense na die betowerde versperring loop, “as hulle hoor wat jy alles hierdie jaar gedoen het.”

“Trots?” sê Harry. “Is jy mal? Al daardie kere wat ek dood kon gewees het en dit nie reggekry het nie? Hulle sal woedend wees . . .”

En saam-saam stap hulle terug deur die poort na die Moggelwêreld.